

CAPPUCCINO ASSASSINO

The Last Dance

Lorenzo Memetico

To my wife Claudia,
for her infinite patience
while I lost myself in the evenings
in the absurd parallel worlds of brainrot.

To my daughter Melissa,
who gave me back the keys
to unlock my imagination.

And to Rob,
who reignited in me
my love for books
when I thought I'd lost it forever.

Without you,
this journey
would never have begun.

— Lorenzo Memetico

PREFACE

Have you ever stared too long into the abyss of the Internet and felt like the abyss was staring back at you?

That's what happened to me when, on a seemingly ordinary afternoon, I opened TikTok and was sucked into a vortex of anthropomorphic AI-generated animals, accompanied by hypnotic, nonsensical rhymes.

"Tralalero Tralala, the shark with blue sneakers..."

Thus began the first video that appeared in my feed. The algorithm, in its infinite wisdom (or malice), had decided that I was ready to be initiated into the cult of Italian brainrot. I didn't know yet that I was about to embark on a journey from which I would never return. A journey that would lead me to write this book you now hold in your hands.

But what exactly is brainrot? Literally meaning "cerebral decay", the term was defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially as a consequence of excessive consumption of material considered trivial or undemanding". In recent years, this term has seen a 230% surge in usage, thanks to the spread of content that seems specifically designed to liquefy our neurons.

Italian brainrot represents a peculiar variation of this phenomenon: unsettling animals created with artificial intelligence, often with human characteristics or surreal elements (a shark with sneakers, an elephant living inside a sandal, a crocodile piloting fighter jets), accompanied by rhyming couplets that mix profanity, nonsense, and repetitive phrases, all recited by a mechanical voice as alien as it is hypnotic.

At first, I watched them with the same detached and vaguely superior gaze with which one observes fleeting web trends. "Here's another absurd trend destined to disappear within a few weeks," I thought. But the more I watched, the more I felt there was something different. As if behind the apparent senselessness lay a coherent world, a universe with its own rules, a mythology in the making.

Then came the videos by "Il Mariele" and "Dr. Dexo".

These two creators did something extraordinary: they began to narrate stories, to build backgrounds, to weave relationships between these seemingly disconnected characters. Suddenly, Bombardiro Crocodilo was no longer just a flying crocodile with a nonsensical rhyme, but a warlord who had fought in the Twenty Years' War against General Struzzobardo. Tung Tung Tung Sahur became a wooden club with arms and legs. Espresso Signora emerged as a mysterious crime figure with a past intertwined with the other characters. It was then that I understood: I was witnessing the birth of a modern digital mythology. Just as the bards of ancient Greece collected stories during their travels, weaving folk tales into what would become the corpus of classical myths, these creators

were collecting fragments of AI-generated absurdity and transforming them into a collective narrative.

And I, fascinated and incredulous, started taking notes.

My collection of brainrot lore grew day by day. I saved videos, transcribed rhymes, drew maps of the relationships between characters. I created a personal encyclopedia of this crazy and wonderful universe. I didn't know yet what I would do with it, but I felt I had to document it, preserve it, give it a more permanent form than the ephemeral flow of social media.

The turning point came when I began to notice how these stories resonated with ancient narrative archetypes. In the conflict between Bombardiro Crocodilo and his treacherous brother Bombombini Gusini, I recognised echoes of the biblical rivalry between Cain and Abel. In the character of Cappuccino Assassino, the relentless hitman with a heart of ice who rediscovers his humanity thanks to the love of Ballerina Cappuccina, I recognised the classic anti-hero redemption arc.

It was then that I decided to write this book.

I didn't want to limit myself to collecting existing stories; I wanted to give them coherence, depth, a common thread that united them all. I wanted to create a contemporary epic from seemingly senseless material. A work that could be read both as a surreal diversion and as a reflection on the human capacity to find meaning even in the most chaotic nonsense.

The result is *Cappuccino Assassino: The Last Dance* – a novel that takes the most iconic characters of Italian brainrot and transforms them into protagonists of a story of revenge, redemption, and love, set in a universe where coffee cups and flying crocodiles exist side by side.

I chose to focus primarily on the story of Cappuccino Assassino because, among all the characters in the brainrot pantheon, he was the most iconic, the most charismatic, and offered the greatest narrative possibilities. A lethal hitman, trained in the art of death, who rediscovers his lost humanity thanks to the love of a ballerina. A man tormented by his violent past who desperately seeks to build a different future. There is something deeply universal in this trajectory, something that speaks to the human capacity to change, to evolve, to redeem oneself.

But fear not: while I have built a coherent narrative, I haven't sacrificed the joyful madness and unpredictability that make brainrot so irresistible. You'll still find sharks with sneakers, elephants in sandals, and crocodiles piloting fighter jets. You'll still find moments of pure nonsense that will make you doubt your sanity. You'll still find that strange mixture of unease and amusement that characterises the original videos.

This book does not claim to be a literary work in the traditional sense of the term. Rather, it is an experiment, an attempt to give form to a cultural phenomenon born from the chaos of the digital age. It is a bridge between internet folklore and classical narration, between the absurdity of memes and the archetypal nature of myths.

It is also, in a sense, a tribute to all those creators who, with their unbridled imagination, built this strange universe piece by piece. To "Il Mariele" and "Dr. Dexo", of course, but also to all the others who contributed with their interpretations, their additions, their reworkings.

This book would not have existed without their pioneering work.

Il Mariele, with his hype-filled storytelling, captivated me from the start and made me reconsider brainrot.

Dr. Dexo made me enter the rabbit hole and showed me how much history there could be behind a take-away cappuccino cup.

And of course, it's a tribute to the TikTok algorithm, that unfathomable entity that decided, for reasons beyond comprehension, that what humanity needed at this precise historical moment were AI-generated animals belting out rhymes.

Who am I to argue with the wisdom of the algorithm?

As you prepare to immerse yourself in this strange journey, I want to leave you with a thought. Italian brainrot may seem like just another strange passing trend, another internet craze destined to be forgotten as soon as the next collective obsession arrives. But there's something deeper at play here. We are witnessing the birth of a new form of mythology, a collective creation facilitated by technology but deeply rooted in our ancestral needs to tell stories, to make sense of chaos, to create imaginary worlds that reflect and comment on our own.

In an era where artificial intelligence is redefining artistic creation, brainrot offers a fascinating case study: content generated by algorithms that humans then reinterpret, rework, and mythologise. A cycle of creation in which machines and humans collaborate, often unintentionally, in the construction of a shared imaginary.

This book is just the beginning. The stories of Cappuccino Assassino, Ballerina Cappuccina, Bombardiro Crocodilo, and all the others will continue to evolve, grow, and transform.

There will be other chapters, other adventures, other worlds to explore. And I will be there, like a modern-day bard, to collect these stories and give them form.

Welcome to the universe of Italian brainrot.

Let the post-redemption brainrot begin!

Lorenzo Memetico
Milan, May 2025

CONTENTS

PREFACE	2
1. THE TASTE OF REVENGE	6
A week earlier	7
2. THE ESCAPE	15
3. THE ROOTS OF THE PAST	22
4. THE SECOND TRAGEDY	31
Ten years earlier	31
5. THE REVELATION	40
6. THE BETRAYAL	49
The Assassin's Escape	55
7. THE POISON	58
8. THE AWAKENING	64
9. THE RETURN OF BOMBARDIRO	72
10. THE DANCE OF THE SISTERS	89
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	99
11. POST CREDIT: A NEW GAME	100

1. THE TASTE OF REVENGE

There are stories that are told and stories that are whispered. This is one of those passed down only on the darkest nights, as rain taps on rooftops and the wind carries secrets no one should know.

I was there when it happened. It was closing night at the Arabica Theatre, the final show of the season. All the city's finest had gathered to witness the performance of Ballerina Cappuccina, the brightest star in the firmament of dance.

The lights dimmed, the orchestra began to play the sweet notes of the "Black Coffee Swan Dance", and the red velvet curtain rose to reveal the magic. For two hours, Ballerina Cappuccina had enchanted the audience with her supernatural grace. Every movement told a story, every gesture was poetry.

Then, the intermission. Fifteen minutes of chatter and champagne in the lobby. And finally, the final act.

But when the curtain rose for the last time, a deathly silence fell over the theatre.

In the centre of the stage, illuminated by a single spotlight, lay Ballerina Cappuccina. Motionless. Her snow-white tutu was stained with something dark. Beside her, a small empty vial.

The first scream came from a woman in the front row. Then chaos. People fleeing, others approaching the stage, desperate pleas to call a doctor.

But I remained still, in the shadow of my private box. Something was wrong with that scene. Something my trained eyes had caught that others missed.

As the theatre emptied and authorities arrived, I slipped silently backstage.

I snapped a few photos. Took notes in my notebook. And above all, I observed.

The body's position. Too... composed to be the result of a sudden collapse. The expression on her face. Serene, almost peaceful. Not the contortion of someone dying of poison. And then there was that smell. Subtle, almost imperceptible beneath the scent of stage flowers. A bitter, complex aroma I knew well.

A special extract. Rare. Used for centuries in certain... professions. Not for killing, though.

This was not a suicide. And probably not even a murder. It was a staging. Like the continuation of the show. But for what audience? And above all, who was the director of this macabre spectacle?

As police officers crowded the stage, I noticed a dark figure quickly moving away through a side exit. A flash of metal at their hip. The unmistakable silhouette of a katana.

Cappuccino Assassino.

And so, the hunt began.

A week earlier

Cappuccino Assassino's head was bowed in respect, his katana resting on the ground before him. The room was lit only by a few candles, creating an atmosphere that was at once intimate and menacing. He was a take-away coffee cup with a matte paper surface, his piercing eyes shining with an intelligence as sharp as his katana. His movements are fluid and silent, each gesture calibrated with military precision. His cardboard "skin" bore almost invisible scars, testaments to past battles.

"Have you ever failed a mission, Cappuccino?" Espressona Signora's voice was as soft as silk, but with an undercurrent as sharp as a razor.

"Never, my Signora," he replied, without raising his gaze.

"I know." Espressona rose from her armchair, approaching him with measured steps. Her black dress rustled on the floor like a deathly whisper. She was an espresso cup of imposing and refined appearance, with severe lines that reflected authority and control. Her bearing is always impeccable, every detail of her appearance curated to perfection, like a blade hidden in an elegant sheath. The curves of her body trace an elegant silhouette, pale skin and lipstick strictly black. Like coffee without sugar.

"That is why you are my favourite. My right hand. The one I entrust with the most... delicate tasks."

She stopped before him, so close that Cappuccino could smell the intense aroma of her espresso. "And now I have a mission that only you can complete."

She handed him an envelope sealed with red wax. Cappuccino took it reverently, breaking the seal. Inside was a photograph and some information written in elegant calligraphy.

His heart, usually as cold and still as stone, stirred when he saw the image. A ballerina of extraordinary beauty, captured in a moment of pure grace as she twirled in mid-air.

"Ballerina Cappuccina," he read aloud.

"The rising star of the ballet," Espressona confirmed, an indefinable shadow crossing her gaze. "Loved by all. Idolised by the critics. A true... prodigy."

The last word left her lips with a bitterness that Cappuccino did not fail to notice.

"You want me to eliminate her," he said. It was not a question.

"I want her to disappear," Espressona specified. "No blood. No obvious violence. An accident, perhaps. Or a suicide. Something that won't raise suspicion." She returned to her desk, opening a drawer. From it, she took a small vial containing an amber liquid.

"This will help you." She held it out to him. "One drop in her wine, her tea, anything. Painless. Quick. And above all, untraceable."

Cappuccino took the vial, studying it carefully before placing it in an inner pocket.

"When?" he asked simply.

"The night of her final performance. One week from today. At the Arabica Theatre."

Espressona sat down again, lacing her fingers in front of her. "I want her dead on the stage, Cappuccino. In front of everyone who loves her."

"It will be done, my Signora."

"And I want proof," Espressona added. "Something... personal. A tangible memento that proves to me she will never dance again."

Cappuccino nodded, retrieving his katana and rising to his feet in one fluid motion. "I will not disappoint you."

As he started toward the door, Espressona's voice stopped him one last time.

"Cappuccino."

He turned.

"Do not fail. Not with her." There was something new in her tone. Something that almost resembled... vulnerability? "I could not forgive it."

"Never, my Signora," he promised, and slipped out into the night.

For the next few days, Cappuccino Assassino dedicated himself to studying his victim. It was his usual method: learn her habits, her routines, her weaknesses. Become a shadow in his prey's life, invisible yet ever-present.

He followed Ballerina Cappuccina everywhere. From her elegant apartment to the theatre for rehearsals. From her favourite restaurant to the park where she sometimes sat to read. Always at a distance, always out of sight. A ghost gathering information, preparing for the fatal moment.

But something strange was happening. The more he watched her, the more he felt... disturbed. Not by the assignment itself – he had eliminated dozens of people without batting an eye – but by her. There was something about Ballerina Cappuccina that unsettled him deeply.

Her grace, perhaps. The kindness with which she treated everyone, from the theatre director to the humblest janitor. Or maybe it was the loneliness he sensed in her, despite being constantly surrounded by admirers. A loneliness that, somehow, resonated with his own.

On the evening of the third day, he found himself watching a rehearsal from the theatre's deserted upper gallery. Just him and the shadows, watching Ballerina dance beneath the spotlights, practicing a particularly difficult sequence over and over. She was a cappuccino cup with an ethereal appearance, her cream-coloured surface seeming to radiate a light of its own. Her movements are pure poetry in motion, every gesture a dance even when she is not dancing. Her large, expressive eyes contrast with the delicacy of her features.

It was then that he felt it for the first time. A beat in his chest. Faint, almost hesitant. Like a memory of life in a body that had forgotten what it meant to feel.

His heart, still since that terrible night in his childhood when he had lost everything, was trying to come back to life.

"No," he whispered to himself, clenching a fist against his chest. "No."

But it was too late. Something in Ballerina Cappuccina had awakened the part of him he thought long dead. The part that could still feel emotion.

That could still... love.

And with this realization came the awareness that he could not kill her. No matter the cost, no matter Espressona's fury, not even his impeccable reputation as an infallible assassin

mattered.

For the first time in his career, Cappuccino Assassino would disobey a direct order.

The night before the final performance, Cappuccino Assassino made his decision. He would not eliminate Ballerina Cappuccina. But he couldn't simply let her live, either. Espressona would just send someone else to finish the job. Someone without his... sudden scruples. No, there was only one way to save Ballerina. He had to make her disappear. And to do that, he first had to kidnap her.

He positioned himself in a dimly lit corridor connecting the stage to the dressing rooms. It was one of the theatre's few blind spots, with no security cameras or surveillance staff. He had chosen it carefully during his days of observation.

He heard Ballerina's light footsteps approaching. She had just finished the dress rehearsal for the next day's show. She was alone, as he had predicted. The rest of the company had already left, and she had insisted on staying a little longer, to perfect a sequence she wasn't satisfied with.

He waited for her to turn the corner, then moved with the speed and precision that had made him a legend. One hand over her mouth to stop her from screaming, the other pinning her arms. One fluid motion, almost a macabre dance, and Ballerina Cappuccina was immobilised against his chest.

He expected panic, a struggle, resistance. Instead, after an initial jolt of surprise, she relaxed against him. As if... she had been waiting for him?

"Don't scream," he whispered in her ear. "I don't want to hurt you."

Slowly, he removed his hand from her mouth, ready to clamp it back down if she tried to cry out.

But Ballerina remained silent. She turned slowly to face him, and in her eyes, there was no fear. Only a calm curiosity that left him baffled.

"Cappuccino Assassino," she said, her voice barely a whisper, "I was waiting for you."

Cappuccino took her to an old, abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the city. A place he used as a refuge when he needed to disappear for a while. No one knew about this secret den of his. Not even Espressona.

"How did you know who I am?" he asked, after seating her in an old armchair. He hadn't tied or gagged her. Something told him she wouldn't try to escape.

"My sister talks about you a lot," Ballerina answered, surprising him once again. "About her implacable right hand. The heartless assassin who has never failed a mission."

"Your... sister?"

"Espressona Signora." A sad smile touched her lips. "She didn't tell you, did she? Typical of her, keeping secrets even from her most trusted lieutenants."

Cappuccino stood motionless, trying to process this new information. Espressona and her victim were sisters? This changed everything.

"Why would she want her own sister dead?" he asked, trying to keep his tone neutral despite the shock.

Ballerina smiled sadly. "Envy is a poison more potent than any potion, Cappuccino. Espressona and I were inseparable as children. She was my hero, my guiding star. I wanted to be just like her in every way." She paused, her eyes lost in distant memories. "She taught me my first dance steps, you know? She held my hands as I tried my first pirouettes."

"What changed?"

"Talent." The word came out like a sigh. "That natural gift you cannot learn, cannot buy, cannot steal. She worked so hard, hours and hours of practice, while I... I just needed to see a movement once to replicate it perfectly."

Cappuccino was beginning to understand. "And she couldn't stand it."

"At first, she tried to be happy for me. To be proud. But every round of applause for me was like a slap in the face to her. Every rave review, a stab wound. Until..."

"Until she couldn't take it anymore," he finished.

Ballerina nodded. "She gave up dancing. Disappeared from my life. I heard rumours she had fallen into the criminal underworld, but they seemed so absurd... how could my sweet older sister become a criminal?" A shadow crossed her face.

"And now, here we are. She has become Espressona Signora, the queen of crime. And I am her final obstacle to be eliminated."

Cappuccino remained silent, absorbing this new reality. He had always served Espressona with absolute loyalty, never questioning her orders. But this? Having her own sister assassinated out of envy? Even for him, who had seen the darkest side of humanity, it seemed excessive.

"And now?" Ballerina asked, interrupting his thoughts. "You're here to kill me, right?"

Cappuccino looked into her eyes. The same eyes that, on stage, had made him feel alive again.

"No," he said finally. "I can't. I won't."

Ballerina seemed surprised, but not frightened. "Then what will you do? If you return to her empty-handed..."

"I won't return empty-handed," Cappuccino said, a plan beginning to form in his mind.

"Espressona will have her proof. But you will have to disappear. Forever."

"How?" Ballerina asked, a glimmer of hope illuminating her face.

"I have a potion," Cappuccino replied, pulling out the vial Espressona had given him. "It's not a poison, like your sister's. It's a powerful sleeping draught that simulates death. It slows the heart and breath until they are imperceptible. For about six hours, you will appear dead for all intents and purposes. Just in time for the journalists to snap the photos for the front page."

"And then?"

"And then you will wake up. But by then, you will be far from the city. Safe."

Ballerina studied him carefully. "Why would you do this? You're risking everything. Your position, your reputation... your life."

Cappuccino looked away, unable to answer a question to which he himself did not fully know the answer. What was driving him to betray Espressona, the woman who had given him purpose after years of empty existence? Was it just admiration for Ballerina's beauty and grace? Or was there something deeper, more primitive, re-emerging from the ashes of

his scorched heart?

"Let's just say..." he began, searching for the words, "sometimes, even an assassin needs to save someone, instead of eliminating them."

For the first time since he had kidnapped her, Ballerina smiled openly. A smile that lit up the room more than any candle.

"So," she said, "what's the plan?"

The plan was simple in its audacity. Ballerina would drink the potion during her final solo, the climax of the show. She would "die" on stage, in front of a packed theatre.

In the chaos that would follow, Cappuccino would carry her away, replacing her with another body. Cappuccino Assassino knew the city morgue well, and he had the right connections to get another body for the swap.

The night before the show, sitting in the abandoned warehouse that had become their temporary refuge, they went over every detail.

"Remember," Cappuccino said, "you have to drink the entire vial in one go. The effect will be quick, a matter of seconds. Make sure you're in the centre of the stage, clearly visible."

Ballerina nodded, strangely calm for someone who was about to stage her own death. "And the replacement?"

"I'll take care of it. I've already... prepared everything." Cappuccino preferred not to go into the details of how he had obtained the replacement body. There are some things it's better not to know, even for someone entrusting her life to a professional assassin.

"And after?" Ballerina asked, looking at him with eyes that seemed to see through all his barriers.

"After," he replied, "you will be free. You can start a new life, far from here. With a new name, a new identity."

"And you?"

The question caught him by surprise. He hadn't thought much beyond the immediate plan. What would he do after betraying Espressona? Where would he go? Who would he become if he was no longer Cappuccino Assassino?

"I will return to Espressona," he said at last. "I'll bring her the 'proof' of your death. A lock of your hair, maybe a personal piece of jewellery stained with blood. Something convincing."

"And then?"

"And then I will continue to serve her. As if nothing has changed."

Ballerina shook her head, moving closer to him. "I don't believe that. Not after what you're about to do. She won't let you live if she ever finds out the truth."

"Then I'll have to make sure she never finds out," he replied, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

Ballerina took his hand, a gesture so unexpected that Cappuccino stiffened. Gentle, caring human contact was something he had long forgotten.

"Come with me," she whispered. "After the show. After it's all over. Let's run away together." Cappuccino stared at her, astonished. "Why would you want me to come with you? I'm an assassin. My hands are stained with the blood of dozens of people."

"And now you're risking everything to save one," she countered. "That says much more than your past."

For a moment, Cappuccino allowed himself to imagine it. A life far from the city, from crime, from blood. A life with Ballerina at his side. A life where his heart could continue to beat, instead of returning to the cold stillness he had grown accustomed to.

It was a dangerous fantasy. A dream he could not afford.

"We'll see," he said finally, pulling his hand away. "First, let's focus on getting you out of that theatre alive."

Ballerina nodded, but in her eyes there was a determination he recognised. She wouldn't let the subject drop so easily.

"One more thing," she said. "Promise me that, whatever happens tomorrow, you'll take care of yourself."

Cappuccino almost smiled at the request, so simple and yet so alien to him. Take care of himself? He had never done that. Not since his village was destroyed, not since he had taken the path of the assassin.

"I promise," he said anyway, knowing it was probably a lie.

But there was something in the way she looked at him that made him feel... different. As if, maybe, that promise might be worth keeping.

And so here we were at the Arabica Theatre. The night of the final performance. The culmination of the plan that would change everything.

Cappuccino positioned himself strategically in the wings, invisible in the shadows but with a perfect view of the stage. He wore the uniform of a lighting technician, a disguise that allowed him to move about freely without arousing suspicion.

The theatre was packed, every seat taken. In the front row, he noticed some of Espressona's men, easily recognizable by their dark suits and watchful expressions. They were there to witness the ballerina's "accidental death", and to ensure that Cappuccino completed his mission.

But the queen of the underworld herself was not present. Cappuccino had expected as much; Espressona preferred to remain in the shadows, directing from afar. Better that way. Fewer complications.

The lights dimmed, the orchestra began to play, and the show began.

Ballerina Cappuccina appeared on stage, ethereal as ever, but with a new intensity in her eyes. Only Cappuccino knew she was literally dancing for her life.

For nearly two hours, the audience was transported into a world of beauty and grace.

Ballerina was sublime, surpassing herself with every movement, every expression. As if she wanted to imprint one last, indelible image in the memory of those watching.

And then the moment came. The final solo. "The Dance of Twilight", a piece of extraordinary emotional intensity that culminated in a sequence of pirouettes at the centre of the stage.

Cappuccino watched Ballerina as she reached the apex of the choreography. He saw her fluidly draw out the small vial hidden in her costume, bring it to her lips during a particularly elaborate twirl, and drink the contents in a single gulp.

For three, four, five seconds, nothing happened. Ballerina continued to dance, her face lit by a radiant smile.

Then, just as she was performing a *grand jeté* – a majestic leap that sent her soaring through the air – her body stiffened. The smile froze into a mask of surprise. And when she landed, instead of continuing with her usual grace, her legs gave way.

Ballerina Cappuccina collapsed in the centre of the stage, as motionless as a porcelain doll dropped by a distracted child.

For a moment, the audience was silent, thinking it was part of the choreography. Then someone screamed. And chaos erupted.

Cappuccino moved quickly amid the general confusion. While doctors and theatre staff rushed onto the stage, he slipped unnoticed toward Ballerina's body. One of the medics held her wrist, looking at his watch, and sadly announced the current time as the time of death. Ballerina was transferred into a black bag, which was zipped shut to be sent to the town morgue.

With swift, expert movements, Cappuccino took advantage of a moment of distraction from the undertakers to swap the bag containing Ballerina with the previously prepared bag holding the substitute body.

Everything was going according to plan. He positioned it exactly where Ballerina's body had lain, made sure the resemblance was enough to fool a superficial glance, and slipped away before he could be noticed.

Now all he had to do was wait. Wait for the potion to wear off, for Ballerina to awaken, and then get her out of the city, toward a new life.

But as he watched the chaos he had helped create – the paramedics declaring the ballerina dead, the tears of the audience, the journalists already poised to report the tragic news – Cappuccino couldn't help but wonder if he had made the right choice.

Could he really escape Espressona? Could he really abandon the life he knew? And above all, could he really allow himself to hope for a future with Ballerina?

He didn't know. But for the first time in years, he felt something that looked dangerously like hope.

And now, as night envelops the city and the news of Ballerina Cappuccina's death spreads like wildfire, I continue my observation. From a dark corner, from the roof of a nearby building, from the crack in a window.

This is only the first page of a story that promises to be far more complex, far darker, far more surprising than anyone can imagine.

Who is Cappuccino Assassino, really? What is the real reason behind Espressona's hatred for her sister? And the body on the theatre stage – is it really a substitute, or is there something I missed?

Questions, questions, questions. And I intend to find the answers. All of them.
Because this is my nature. To observe. To investigate. To uncover.
And as the curtain falls on the first act of this drama, I pull out my notebook and begin to write. To record every detail, every inconsistency, every clue.
Because the truth is out there. Hidden in the shadows like a coffee bean in a black cup.
And I will find it. Even if I have to follow Cappuccino Assassino and Ballerina Cappuccina to the ends of the earth.
Even if I have to unveil secrets that no one wants revealed.

2. THE ESCAPE

Dawn crept slowly through the city's alleyways, transforming the night's shadows into pale ghosts. In the underground refuge of the Arabica Theatre, Ballerina Cappuccina was beginning to awaken from the potion's effects.

A deep breath, a flutter of eyelashes, a slight movement of her fingers. Returning from the realm of apparent death was a gradual, almost painful process. Her eyes opened slowly, confused and disoriented.

"Welcome back," Cappuccino whispered, sitting beside her, keeping a watchful vigil.

"Did... did it work?" Ballerina asked, her voice as hoarse as sandpaper.

"To perfection." Cappuccino handed her a glass of water, which she accepted gratefully. "You are officially dead. The morning papers are already talking about the tragic end of the great Ballerina Cappuccina, who collapsed on stage during her final performance."

A shadow of sadness crossed Ballerina's face. "And everyone thinks I..."

"Yes. A sudden heart attack, according to the doctors. Given how quickly I got you out, they didn't have time to thoroughly examine the substitute body... I also have connections at the morgue to ensure their silence."

Ballerina lowered her gaze, absorbing the reality of her new condition. "My career, my friends, my life... all gone."

"But you are alive," Cappuccino reminded her. "And free from your sister."

"Free," she repeated, as if tasting a word in a foreign language. "I don't even know what that means. For as long as I can remember, I have lived either in Espressona's shadow or under her threat."

Cappuccino remained silent, respecting her moment of grief. He knew what it meant to lose everything in an instant. Having chosen it didn't make the loss any less painful.

"We have to move," he said finally. "This hiding place is only temporarily safe."

As Ballerina stood up, still unsteady on the legs that had made her famous, Cappuccino pulled two vials from his belt. One empty – the one Ballerina had drunk during the show. The other still sealed, containing a liquid that was also amber, perhaps more like honey.

"This," he said, showing her the sealed vial, "is what Espressona gave me to kill you. Pure poison. One sip and the heart stops in seconds." His voice was cold, professional, but the way he held the vial betrayed disgust. "I want you to keep it."

Ballerina looked at him, astonished. "Me? Why?"

"For three reasons. First: it's proof of your sister's intentions. Second: if I'm captured, I don't want them to find proof on me that I didn't follow the order as given." He paused, his gaze hardening. "Third: it could be useful as a last-resort weapon, if we ever find ourselves with our backs against the wall."

Ballerina took the vial cautiously, as if handling a venomous snake. "Is it really that lethal?"

"One sip would be enough to kill three people. Hide it and never touch it, unless absolutely necessary."

With the vial clutched in her palm, Ballerina felt the weight of what her sister had ordered. Not a simple assassination, but a public humiliation, a final death in front of everything she

loved.

"I will," she promised, placing the vial in an inner pocket of the dress Cappuccino had procured for her. Simple, anonymous clothes. Nothing that would recall the famous ballerina.

"Now let's go," Cappuccino said. "I've prepared a temporary shelter. Tomorrow I'll take the 'proof' of your death to Espressona, and then we can plan our next move."

Ballerina nodded but stopped at the doorway. "Cappuccino."

He turned.

"Thank you. For risking everything. For me."

A flicker of emotion crossed the assassin's usually impassive face.

"Don't thank me yet. We're not safe."

The refuge turned out to be an old, abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the city. It had once been a coffee depot, and the aroma still lingered in the air, beneath layers of dust and neglect.

"No one knows this place," Cappuccino explained as he led her through a hidden entrance at the back. "I bought it years ago through a front man. Not even Espressona knows about it."

The interior was spartan but surprisingly comfortable. A sleeping area, a small kitchen, even a corner with a few books and a worn armchair. It was, Ballerina realised, a refuge in the truest sense of the word. Not just a hiding place, but a place where Cappuccino came to be... himself. Whoever he was when he wasn't wearing the assassin's mask.

"You can rest," he said, gesturing to a makeshift bed. "I need to prepare the proof to take to Espressona tomorrow."

Ballerina sat in the armchair instead, suddenly reluctant to leave him alone. "Tell me about it."

"About what?"

"About you. The world I come from. Why you became... this."

Cappuccino visibly tensed. "It's not a pleasant story."

"Few true stories are," she replied. "And you already know mine."

For a long moment, Cappuccino remained motionless, poised between refusal and something that almost looked like... longing. A longing for connection, for understanding.

"I was born in a small village," he began at last, his voice low and controlled. "A peaceful community of farmers and artisans. My father was a tea ceremony master, my mother taught dance to the children."

Ballerina noted the use of the past tense but did not interrupt.

"I was eight years old when Bombardiro Crocodilo attacked the village. There was no strategic reason, no military objective. It was just... collateral damage in the feud between him and his Brother. They had been at war for a long time. A couple of decades."

Cappuccino's eyes were lost in memories Ballerina could only imagine.

"I was the only survivor. An old monk, Maestro Matcha, found me wandering in the woods and took me to his secret dojo. There, I was trained in the art of assassination."

"To get your revenge," Ballerina whispered.

"At first, yes. But over time, revenge became secondary. Matcha taught me not to feel, not to

emote. Pain turned into discipline, anger into precision. I became a tool, sharp and cold."

"And then you met my sister."

Cappuccino nodded. "Your sister gave me a purpose when all I wanted was to die. She gave me an identity when I no longer knew who I was."

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken meaning.

"And now?" Ballerina asked after a long silence. "What do you want now?"

Cappuccino looked at her, and for a moment Ballerina saw a crack in his mask of impassivity. A vulnerability that perhaps even he didn't know he possessed.

"I don't know," he admitted finally. "For years, I've lived for the next assignment, the next mission. I never thought about an 'after.'"

"You could leave," Ballerina suggested. "Far away from this city. Start a new life."

"And leave what? I have nothing here."

"You have me," she said simply.

Cappuccino looked at her, surprised.

"I mean," she clarified quickly, "if you wanted to. We could leave together. Two ghosts starting a new life."

Before Cappuccino could answer, a noise outside put them on alert. A rustle, perhaps, or a footstep too close to the entrance.

In an instant, Cappuccino was on his feet, katana already half-drawn. "Stay here," he ordered, moving silently toward the door.

Ballerina held her breath as he slipped outside. Seconds turned into minutes. The tension grew, as palpable as the coffee aroma that still permeated the walls.

When Cappuccino finally returned, his face was a mask of professional efficiency.

"Nothing to worry about. Probably an animal."

But something in his eyes told a different story. Something Ballerina couldn't quite decipher.

"Now rest," he said. "Tomorrow will be a long day."

Espressona Signora's palace was a masterpiece of ostentation and intimidation. High columns, fine marble, guards at every entrance. Not a place one could enter easily – unless invited.

Cappuccino, in the elegant black uniform he wore on official missions, walked through the main gate with the confidence of someone who knows exactly where they are going and why. No one dared to stop him or ask questions. His reputation preceded him like a deadly shadow.

"Signora is expecting you," an assistant informed him, leading him through luxurious corridors to the Grand Hall – as Cappuccino mentally called it, though Espressona would have found the term melodramatic.

Espressona Signora was sitting at her mahogany desk, studying some documents. To one side of the desk, the newspaper with the front-page news of Ballerina's death was prominently displayed, as expected. She did not immediately look up when Cappuccino entered, a small power play he knew well.

"It is done," he said simply, remaining standing a few paces away. Only then did Espressona raise her eyes. "Are you certain?"

In response, Cappuccino placed his macabre tribute on the desk: the lock of cream-coloured hair and the blood-stained handkerchief, presented in an elegant dark wood box.

Espressona slowly opened the box, observing the contents with an inscrutable expression. She took the lock of hair between her fingers, caressing it almost tenderly.

"How did it happen?" she asked finally.

"As ordered. In public, on stage. She drank the contents of the vial during her final performance. It looked like a sudden collapse."

"And the body?"

"I replaced the original with a convincing substitute. Her body has been... disposed of, as per protocol."

Espressona nodded slowly, seemingly satisfied. But Cappuccino, who had known her for years, noticed something in her eyes. A shadow of... what? Remorse? Impossible. Sadness? Perhaps.

Whatever it was, it passed quickly, replaced by her usual calculating coldness.

"Excellent work, as always," she said, closing the box. "Your reward is waiting for you in the usual place."

"Thank you, my Signora." Cappuccino gave a short bow, preparing to leave.

"One more thing, Cappuccino."

He stopped, turning back to her.

"Do you know why I wanted her eliminated?" Espressona asked, in an almost conversational tone.

Cappuccino carefully weighed his answer. To tell the truth – that he knew of their family tie – would be to admit he had spoken with Ballerina before "killing" her. An unnecessary risk.

"I do not ask questions, my Signora. Ever."

A faint smile touched Espressona's lips. "And that is why you are the best, my dear assassin. The very best."

With a nod, she dismissed him. Cappuccino left the room with a measured pace, maintaining his composure until he was outside the palace, far from the watchful eyes of Espressona's guards.

Only then did he allow himself to take a deep breath. The first part of the plan was complete. Now came the hard part: disappearing forever.

Left alone in her study, Espressona opened a secret drawer in her desk. From it, she took a bottle of fine liquor and a single glass. A habit she indulged in only on the most significant occasions.

She poured a generous amount, watching the amber liquid catch the sunset light filtering through the windows.

"To family," she toasted sarcastically, raising the glass toward the portrait of her mother hanging on the wall. Cappuccina Canterina, the great opera singer, smiled from the golden frame, unaware of her daughter's machinations.

Espressona took a long sip, savouring the burn as it went down her throat. She felt no joy for

her sister's death, she realised. But no remorse either. Only a sort of... completeness, perhaps. As if a cycle had finally closed.

She went to the window, looking out over the city that lay at her feet. Her empire. Built with patience, cunning, and a healthy dose of ruthlessness. An empire that no one would ever question again.

The thought drew a bitter smile from her. For years she had envied Ballerina, her natural talent, her innate grace, the adoration of the public. She had suffered in the shadows while her sister shone in the spotlight.

But now, who was the real winner? Who truly held the power?

"I'm sorry, little sister," she murmured to the glass. "But in this world, there isn't room for two queens."

As night fell, Cappuccino returned to the warehouse. He found Ballerina sitting in the armchair, engrossed in one of his few books – an ancient text on military strategy.

"Everything went according to plan," he announced, carefully closing the door behind him.

"Espressona accepted the proof. You are officially dead to the world."

Ballerina set the book down. "And now?"

"Now comes the hard part. We have to leave the city. Espressona has eyes and ears everywhere. It won't be easy to get past her checkpoints."

He walked over to an old wooden table in the corner, unrolling a worn map. "I have some contacts in Crema Sul Mare. A small coastal town, far enough away not to attract attention, but large enough to allow us to go unnoticed."

"Crema Sul Mare," Ballerina repeated, coming closer to look at the map. "I've never been there."

"It's beautiful, in a simple, honest way. The sea is crystal clear. The air smells of salt and citrus." For a moment, Cappuccino's expression softened, as if he were remembering something precious.

"Have you been there before?"

"Once, a long time ago. Before... before all of this."

Ballerina didn't ask further, sensing there was a deeper story that perhaps he would tell her one day.

"How will we get there?" she asked instead.

"I have a contact, a smuggler who runs a route through the city's old underground tunnels. They'll take us directly past the borders, where a car will be waiting for us."

"And then?"

Cappuccino looked at her. "And then we'll be free to go wherever we want."

There was something in the way he said it – a plural, not a singular – that brought a small smile to Ballerina's face.

"When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow night. The longer we stay here, the riskier it gets."

Ballerina nodded, then walked over to a small mirror hanging on the wall. She looked at herself, studying her own reflection as if seeing a stranger.

"I don't know who I am without dance," she admitted. "It's been my whole life."

Cappuccino came closer, stopping beside her. In the reflection, they made a strange pair:

he, dark and sharp as a blade; she, bright and fluid as water.

"You're not just a ballerina," he said. "You're also a survivor. Like me."

Their gazes met in the reflection. A moment of connection that went beyond words. Two broken souls who, perhaps, could find a form of healing together.

"Tell me about Lololo," Cappuccino asked suddenly.

Ballerina looked at him in surprise, then a veil of sadness crossed her face. "The dancer with the heart of ice? That's an old story."

"I want to know your old stories."

She smiled faintly. "Lololo was... is... the most talented dancer of his generation. Technically perfect. Artistically flawless." She paused. "And completely incapable of loving anything other than dance itself."

"But you loved him."

"I thought I loved him. Or maybe I loved the idea of him. The perfect dancer for the perfect ballerina. A fairy tale that never existed except in my own head."

Cappuccino remained silent, listening.

"We danced together once," Ballerina continued. "A *pas de deux* that was meant to be the highlight of the season. And it was perfect, technically speaking. But there was no... connection. No spark. Just two bodies executing rehearsed movements."

"And after?"

"After, nothing. He moved on, I moved on. End of story."

But there was something in her tone that suggested the story wasn't completely over. A residual pain, perhaps. Or a missed opportunity.

"And you?" she asked. "Was there ever anyone...?"

Cappuccino looked away. "Once. But that's a story for another time."

Ballerina nodded, respecting his reticence. "We should rest," she suggested. "As you said, tomorrow will be an important day."

But as they prepared for the night, neither of them noticed the slender silhouette moving away from the window. A figure that moved with the grace of a bird in flight, disappearing into the darkness.

From the roof of a nearby building, I watched the scene through a pair of old binoculars. My feathers were damp with dew, the raincoat heavy on my shoulders. But I was used to the discomfort. It was the price of my trade.

Cappuccino Assassino and Ballerina Cappuccina. A hitman and a ballerina, both officially dead to the world. An unlikely couple, united by even more unlikely circumstances.

Their plan seemed solid. Underground tunnels, smugglers, a new life in a coastal town. Romantic, almost. And destined to fail, if my instincts were correct.

Because there was one element they hadn't considered. An element watching from afar, gathering information, waiting for the perfect moment to act. An element that preferred to remain in the shadows.

I tucked my notebook into the inner pocket of my raincoat, protecting it from the night's dampness. My notes were piling up, forming an ever more complex picture of this affair.

Who was Cappuccino Assassino, really? Where did he truly come from? And why had Espressona Signora wanted her own sister dead with such determination?

Questions that still awaited answers. Questions that pushed me to dig deeper, to follow this story to its inevitable conclusion.

Because I am an observer. A chronicler. A collector of truths.

And the truth, like good coffee, needs time to reveal its full aroma...

3. THE ROOTS OF THE PAST

The night before the escape promised to be long. The silence in the old warehouse was broken only by Ballerina's steady breathing, as she finally collapsed into a restless sleep on the makeshift cot.

Cappuccino, however, kept watch. The habit of vigilance was too ingrained for him to give in to sleep at such a critical moment. Sitting near the only window, his katana resting on his knees, he scanned the darkness outside while his mind wandered through equally dark territories.

Tomorrow, they would attempt their escape. Tomorrow, they would risk everything for a new life. A life he had never dared to imagine. A life... together.

The thought was as foreign as it was alluring. Like a forbidden food one has only heard of but never tasted.

A faint moan brought him back to the present. Ballerina was stirring in her sleep, her face twisted in an expression of anguish. A nightmare, perhaps. Or the weight of her new reality manifesting in her subconscious.

Cappuccino remained motionless, torn between the desire to comfort her and the reluctance to invade her personal space. He didn't know how to offer comfort. It was an art he had never learned, never needed in his life as an assassin.

"No... please," Ballerina murmured in her sleep, one hand reaching out toward an invisible enemy.

In the end, the need to protect her won out. He approached silently, kneeling beside the cot. With hesitation, he placed a hand on her shoulder, a touch as light as a feather.

"Shhh," he whispered. "You're safe."

Surprisingly, that was enough. Ballerina's body visibly relaxed, her breathing returning to normal. It seemed that even in her sleep, she recognised his presence as a source of safety. This simple fact – that someone could feel safe next to him, an assassin – awakened something deep inside Cappuccino. A memory of who he had been before blood and vengeance defined his existence.

And so, in the quiet of that waiting night, his mind drifted back. To the beginning. To when he was just a child in a peaceful village, unaware of the destiny that awaited him.

The village of Gocciolina was small but vibrant, nestled among rolling hills where the morning light filtered through tangerine trees, creating golden reflections. It was a community of cups, mugs, and glasses that lived mainly off agriculture and small crafts. The young Cappuccino – who, back then, was simply called Goccio – was the son of Tazzina Maestra, a children's dance teacher, and Bricco Saggio, a master of the tea ceremony. A respected family, neither rich nor poor, but rich in the kind of love that makes every house a refuge.

His first eight years of life were a succession of simple, happy days. In the morning, he

helped his father gather herbs for his ceremonies. In the afternoon, he watched his mother teach dance steps to the village children. And in the evening, he listened to stories of distant lands and fantastic adventures, dreaming of one day exploring the world beyond the hills. Little Goccio had a natural talent for movement. His mother often said he had inherited her grace, but with a determination all his own. When he focused on a new dance step or a tea-pouring technique, the world around him ceased to exist.

"Be careful, my son," his father would admonish him affectionately. "Concentration is a virtue, but never forget to look around you. The beauty of tea is not just in the cup, but also in the setting where it is served."

Wise words that, years later, would take on a much darker meaning than Bricco Saggio could ever have imagined.

One day – a day like any other – everything changed. The sky suddenly darkened, as if the sun had been extinguished. A dull roar shook the earth. And then came the bombs.

Bombardiro Crocodilo, the infamous general of the Shadow Army, had chosen the village of Gocciolina for a show of force. There was no strategic reason, no military objective. It was just... in the path of that damned conflict with his brother. A village small enough to be destroyed easily, remote enough not to attract too much attention.

The chaos was total. Destroyed homes, desperate screams, the suffocating heat of fires spreading from one building to the next. In the midst of it all, little Goccio searched desperately for his parents.

He found them in the central square, where just the day before a festive tea ceremony had been held. His mother was already motionless, her empty eyes fixed on the sky. His father, gravely wounded, found the strength for one last command.

"Run, Goccio," he whispered, his life-liquid spilling onto the ground. "Run and don't look back. Live, my son. Live."

And Goccio ran, conflicted but panicked. With tears blurring his vision and his heart feeling as if it would explode, he ran until his legs could carry him no further. He hid in the woods, trembling with fear and grief, as his village was reduced to ash.

It was there, hidden among the roots of an old tree, that he swore revenge. Not with the impulsive fury of a child, but with the cold determination that would become his defining characteristic. A silent promise made to his parents, to his village, to himself.

He would find Bombardiro Crocodilo. And he would make him pay.

For three days and three nights, Goccio wandered through the woods. Starving, dehydrated, in the grip of a deepening despair. On the fourth day, as his strength was about to completely abandon him, he stumbled upon what seemed to be an almost invisible path, hidden among the vegetation.

He followed it, more out of desperation than curiosity.

The path led him to a clearing, and in its centre, a building in an ancient style, with dark tiles and light wooden walls. A dojo, though Goccio did not know the term at the time.

He approached cautiously, and before he could reach the door, it opened. An old tea glass, wrinkled and stern, studied him with piercing eyes.

"I was waiting for you," he said simply.

"You were... waiting for me?" Goccio was confused, frightened. "How did you know I would come?"

The old one did not answer directly. "You survived Crocodilo's massacre. That is no accident. Fate has laid out a path for you, young cup. The question is: will you have the courage to follow it?"

Goccio didn't know what to say. He was just a child, overwhelmed by events too large for him.

"My name is Maestro Matcha," the old one continued. "And this is the Dojo of the Silent Drop. Here we train warriors who move in the shadows to bring balance to the world." He paused, studying young Goccio carefully. "I can teach you to fight. To survive. And one day, perhaps, to get your revenge."

That word, "revenge," ignited something in young Goccio. A fire that would burn for years, fuelling his every breath, his every movement.

"Yes," he said simply. "Teach me."

Thus began the training of the one who would become Cappuccino Assassino.

The first few months at the Dojo of the Silent Drop were hell. Training began before dawn with rigid exercises in meditation and breath control. Then came hours of physical conditioning: running, climbing, balancing on impossible surfaces.

Goccio learned alongside other students, all orphans like him, all with scars both visible and invisible. But while the others found comfort in camaraderie, he isolated himself. The pain of his loss was still too fresh, the wound too deep to allow for new bonds.

This voluntary solitude did not escape the watchful eye of Maestro Matcha.

"Solitude is a double-edged sword, young Goccio," he told him one day, after catching him practicing katana strikes long after training hours. "It can sharpen you, or it can break you."

"I would rather be sharp than broken, Master," Goccio replied, continuing his exercises.

"And what if I told you there is a third way? Neither sharpened to the point of being brittle, nor broken. But forged, like steel that bends but does not break."

Goccio stopped, reflecting on his master's words. "How does one achieve this... forging?"

"By accepting that pain is a part of you, but it is not all that you are." Matcha placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Revenge can be a goal, but it cannot be the sole purpose of your existence. Otherwise, once you achieve it, what will you have left?"

It was a question to which Goccio had no answer. Not then. And perhaps, Cappuccino realised in the present, he didn't have one now, either.

The years passed.

The frightened child became a disciplined adolescent, and then a young man of extraordinary ability. Matcha taught him not only martial arts, but also strategy, camouflage, the art of espionage. How to move without being seen. How to listen without being noticed. How to kill without a trace.

And above all, how to control his emotions. How to transform them from a weakness into a tool.

"Emotions are like coffee," Matcha would explain. "Too hot, and you burn yourself. Too cold, and you lose the aroma. The perfect temperature requires control, patience, and

awareness."

Goccio absorbed every lesson with iron determination. If the master asked for a hundred repetitions of a movement, he would do two hundred. If the other students stopped, exhausted, he continued. His body bore the marks of this obsessive commitment: training scars, defined muscles, reflexes honed beyond the human limit.

But there was a price for all of this. The closer Goccio came to technical perfection, the further he moved from his humanity. The memories of his village, his parents, his former life began to fade, replaced by combat techniques, strategic maps, the names of poisons. It was during one of these endless training sessions that Maestro Matcha gave him a new name.

"From this day on, you will no longer be Goccio," he announced. "You will be Cappuccino. Dark on the outside, but with a heart hidden beneath layers of protection."

"But Master," he objected, "a cappuccino has a sweet heart. I have no sweetness left in me."

"Perhaps not," Matcha conceded. "But you still have a heart, even if you yourself no longer recognise it."

Cappuccino was pulled from his memories by a slight movement. Ballerina had woken up and was watching him in silence.

"Don't you ever sleep?" she asked, her voice still thick with sleep.

"Rarely," he admitted. "A habit."

"You seem... far away. Where were you?"

"In the past. A place I rarely visit."

Ballerina sat up, wrapping herself in a worn blanket to shield against the dawn chill. "I'd like to know that place. If you ever want to share it."

Cappuccino was silent for a moment, then gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Maybe one day."

He stood up, mechanically checking his katana and the other tools of his trade. "We need to get ready. Our contact is expecting us at the tunnel entrance at sunset."

But as he gathered the few things needed for the journey, an unsettling feeling crept over him. A feeling he knew all too well: the premonition of danger.

"Is something wrong?" Ballerina asked, noticing the change in his demeanour.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But I don't like it. It's as if..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't need to. They both felt the tension in the air, like the electricity before a storm.

"Do you think Espressona suspects something?"

"It's possible. Your sister got where she is by trusting no one, not even me." Cappuccino checked outside the window, scrutinizing every shadow with professional care. "We need to be even more cautious."

He moved closer to Ballerina, lowering his voice as if he feared the very walls could be listening. "We're changing the plan. We won't wait until sunset. We'll leave at noon, when

the streets are more crowded. We'll blend in with the market crowd."

"And the contact? The smuggler?"

"I'll send him a message. If he can't adapt, we'll find another way."

Ballerina nodded, trusting his judgment completely. It was strange, she reflected, how quickly she had grown accustomed to this new life on the run. As if a part of her had always known that the fame and applause were just an interlude, not the true essence of her existence.

"Cappuccino," she said suddenly, "if we get separated for any reason, where would we meet?"

The question took him by surprise. It was a possibility he had considered but hoped to avoid. "At the old clock tower, on the edge of the old city. It's been abandoned for years, but I use it as an occasional observation point. No one pays it any mind."

Ballerina committed the information to memory, then stood up, ready to face whatever the day would bring. "I'd better get ready, then."

As she walked away to change, Cappuccino noted her resilience with admiration. She was a ballerina raised in comfort, used to applause and luxury. Yet she was facing this extreme situation with a composure that many of his fellow assassins would have envied.

There was something in her that went beyond physical beauty, beyond the grace of her movements. An inner strength, a core of steel beneath the apparent delicacy. As Maestro Matcha had said: forged to bend, but not to break.

Ballerina returned, already dressed for the journey. She noticed Cappuccino's gaze and smiled at him, a smile that held something new – understanding, perhaps. Or something deeper.

"There's one thing I'd like to know," she said, sitting down beside him. "Something I've been wondering since you spared me."

"What?"

"Why? Why risk everything – your career, your reputation, your very life – for me? A stranger."

The question hung in the air between them, as important as it was inevitable.

Cappuccino could have lied. He could have offered a pragmatic explanation, a cold rationalization. But in that moment, looking into her trusting eyes, he found he didn't want to.

"Because when I saw you dance," he said with a simplicity that surprised him, "I felt something I thought was dead forever. A beat. An awakening."

They looked at each other, and in that gaze was an unspoken promise. A possible future that neither of them yet dared to fully imagine.

Ballerina moved closer, slowly, as if afraid of startling him. Gently, she placed a hand on his cheek. A light touch, almost imperceptible, but one that Cappuccino felt reverberate to the very core of his being.

"Wherever we go after this," she whispered, "I want us to go together."

The words hung between them, a declaration that required no immediate answer. But the way Cappuccino covered her hand with his own was more eloquent than any verbal

promise.

"Now," he said at last, reluctantly breaking the moment of intimacy, "we need to move. Every minute we stay here increases the risk."

The city's central market was a kaleidoscope of colours, smells, and sounds. Stalls selling exotic spices alternated with vendors of fine fabrics. Street musicians performed alongside storytellers narrating ancient legends. And everywhere, the unmistakable aroma of freshly brewed coffee, the city's favourite drink.

In this organised chaos, Cappuccino and Ballerina moved with studied care. He had abandoned his usual black attire for more common clothes, those of a moderately successful merchant. She wore a simple brown dress with a veil that partially covered her face, like a young widow in mourning.

They held hands, like any ordinary couple, blending into the crowd that paid them no attention. Yet Cappuccino was on constant alert. His eyes scanned every corner, every suspicious movement.

And that's how he spotted them.

Two men, seemingly simple market-goers. But the way they moved, the way they methodically scanned the crowd, revealed their true purpose to a trained eye.

"Don't turn around," he whispered to Ballerina, squeezing her hand slightly. "But I think we're being watched."

Ballerina, with admirable self-control, continued to walk normally. "My sister's men?"

"Likely. Or informants. We must be careful."

With studied casualness, he guided Ballerina toward a more crowded section of the market, where carpet sellers displayed their colourful wares. They stopped at a stall, feigning interest in an elaborate red carpet.

"Follow me naturally," Cappuccino murmured, "we'll make a sudden turn into that alley and then pick up the pace. If they're still following us, we'll know for sure they're on our trail."

Ballerina nodded imperceptibly, showing a calm that Cappuccino found increasingly admirable.

They moved through the stalls with ease, then suddenly turned into a side alley. Once out of the crowd's view, they quickened their pace without breaking into a run – running would attract attention.

"Are they following us?" Ballerina asked in a low voice.

"Not anymore," Cappuccino replied, "but we can't risk it. We have to reach the meeting point with the smuggler ahead of schedule. I know a shortcut."

They went through a labyrinth of back alleys, avoiding the city's main arteries where Espressona's observers might spot them. Small passages between dilapidated buildings, hidden courtyards, forgotten service stairs – Cappuccino knew the city like the back of his hand, every corner, every hiding place, every escape route.

"Is all this part of your training?" Ballerina asked as they squeezed through a passage so

narrow they had to walk sideways.

"Part training, part experience," he replied. "An assassin must know not only how to get in, but also how to get out."

They finally reached a small, hidden square, an inner courtyard surrounded by decrepit buildings. A forgotten place, like so many in the old city, but one that Cappuccino clearly knew well.

"We'll wait here," he said. "The smuggler should arrive in an hour. In the meantime, we rest. The journey through the tunnels will be exhausting."

They sat in the shade of an old portico, hidden from the view of any passersby. For the first time since they had fled the theatre, Cappuccino seemed to relax slightly. Not completely – an assassin never fully lets his guard down – but enough to allow himself a brief moment of respite.

"Do you really think we'll manage to escape?" Ballerina asked after a long silence.

"Yes," Cappuccino answered with a confidence that surprised even himself. "We will."

She smiled at him, a smile that held gratitude, trust, and something that looked dangerously like hope.

"And then?" she whispered. "What will we do once we're out of the city?"

Cappuccino looked into the distance, toward the invisible horizon beyond the rooftops.

"There's a coastal town, Crema sul Mare. I visited it once, during a... mission. It's peaceful, far from the major trade routes. A place to start over."

"Start over," Ballerina repeated, savouring the words. "I like that."

They fell silent, letting that idea – starting over, together, in a new place – take shape between them. A dream that seemed more and more concrete, more and more possible.

In that quiet moment, with the sun filtering through the cracks of the old portico creating plays of light on the dusty floor, Cappuccino realised that, for the first time in many, many years, he was thinking of a future that didn't just include missions, targets, eliminations. A future that contained something different.

Something that looked dangerously like happiness.

In her luxurious study, Espressona Signora examined a newly arrived report. The document, written in a code that only a few knew, contained information that left her disturbed.

"Are you absolutely certain?" she asked the man standing before her, a gray-haired ex-military type who was now her head of security.

"Yes, my Signora. The sources are reliable. The body in the coffin is not your sister's. It was replaced."

Espressona drummed her fingers on the desk, a habit she indulged in only in moments of extreme tension. "And Cappuccino?"

"Disappeared since yesterday. He did not show up for the usual evening report."

The queen of the underworld rose, walking toward the window. The city stretched out below her, oblivious to the drama unfolding.

"So," she said slowly, "my most trusted assassin has betrayed me. And my sister is still alive." She turned to her head of security. "I want you to find them. Both of them. Alive."

"Alive, my Signora?" The man seemed surprised. Espressona's orders rarely included the preservation of life.

"Yes. I have a few... questions for them." A cold smile touched her lips. "Then I will decide if they deserve to continue breathing."

When the man left to carry out his orders, Espressona returned to the window. Her mind worked furiously, analysing every possible scenario.

Cappuccino had betrayed her. Cappuccino, who had always carried out every order without hesitation. Cappuccino, who had never failed a mission in all his years of service to her. What had he seen in Ballerina? What had driven him to risk everything – his position, his reputation, his very life – to save her?

And then an even more disturbing possibility entered her mind.

What if it wasn't just an impulsive decision? What if it was part of a larger plan? A plan directed against her?

With an abrupt movement, Espressona pressed a hidden button on the wall. A secret door opened, revealing a room that few knew existed. A room whose walls were covered with maps, photographs, documents – all connected by red threads that formed a complex web.

At the centre of this web, a large photo of a sinister character – or rather, of an anthropomorphic animal: a crocodile in a military uniform. Bombardiro Crocodilo.

The enemy everyone believed to be dead. The enemy she knew was still alive.

"Is this your doing, you old reptile?" she murmured to the photograph. "Have you finally found a way to strike at me?"

It was not a possibility to be dismissed. Bombardiro had always had a particular talent for finding his enemies' weaknesses. And what greater weakness than a family tie that was never completely severed?

Espressona clenched her fists. She would not allow her empire, built with years of sacrifice and cunning, to be threatened. Not by an old enemy, not by a treacherous sister, and certainly not by an ungrateful assassin.

"I will find you," she promised the silence of the room. "And this time, there will be no second chances."

From a nearby roof, a figure watched Espressona's palace with methodical attention. Dark eyes, accustomed to peering into the shadows, did not miss a single detail. His raincoat, damp with morning dew, almost blended in with the tiles on which he was perched. Two parallel stories were unfolding under his watchful gaze. A desperate escape and a ruthless hunt. An assassin and a ballerina seeking freedom. A crime queen seeking revenge. And in between, secrets just waiting to be unveiled.

The Detective jotted something in his notebook, then resumed his observation. It was not yet time to intervene. Only to observe, document, understand.

Because the truth, like good coffee, needs time to reveal its full aroma.

4. THE SECOND TRAGEDY

Perched on the edge of a roof, Cappuccino watched the sunset tinge the city with gold. The time to meet the smuggler was approaching. Soon, he and Ballerina would embark on the dangerous journey through the underground tunnels, toward freedom.

Ballerina was resting in the makeshift hiding place below him, gathering her strength for the long night that awaited them. Cappuccino had insisted on making one last round of reconnaissance, to make sure no one was following them, that the way was clear.

But that wasn't the only reason he had sought a moment of solitude.

It was because of the memories. Memories that his growing closeness with Ballerina had unleashed like coffee beans thrown into boiling water, spreading through his consciousness. Memories of another life. Of another chance at happiness, shattered by violence.

He closed his eyes, letting the past swallow him, perhaps for the last time.

Ten years earlier

The young man who was once known as Goccio completed his training at the Dojo of the Silent Drop at the age of eighteen. There were no elaborate ceremonies, no diploma, no public recognition. Only Maestro Matcha handing him a katana forged from ancient metal.

"This blade has a name," the old master said. "It is called 'Schiuma di Luna' (Foam of the Moon). It belongs to one who has completed their journey from darkness to light."

"But I have not completed any journey, Master," objected the young man, who now called himself Cappuccino. "I am still trapped in the darkness."

Matcha smiled, a rare expression on his usually stern face. "The true darkness, Cappuccino, is not what surrounds us. It is what we carry within. And you have begun to see beyond it, even if you do not yet realise it."

With these enigmatic words, the master gave him his blessing to leave the dojo. Not a final farewell, but a goodbye for now. Permission to explore the world, to find his own path.

"Remember," were Matcha's last words as Cappuccino passed through the gate, "an assassin sees only the target. A warrior sees the entire battlefield. A sage sees the before and after of the battle. Choose wisely what you want to be."

Cappuccino did not reply. Partly because he didn't know what to say, partly because he feared his voice might betray the emotion he was desperately trying to hide. He simply gave a deep bow, then walked away, the katana Schiuma di Luna securely fastened to his back.

For two years he travelled, accepting missions that seemed just to him. Never the innocent, never those who did not deserve the blade. Warlords who terrorised defenseless villages. Traffickers who exploited the desperate. Corrupt officials who starved the poor to enrich themselves.

His reputation grew, but he was not yet Cappuccino Assassino, the shadow feared by all. He was just a ronin, a masterless samurai, who offered his blade to those fighting for just causes.

It was during one of these assignments that he met Mocaccina.

He had been hired to protect a village threatened by a band of raiders. A simple job, he thought. Eliminate the threat, accept payment (always modest, as he never asked for more than the villagers could afford), and move on.

He hadn't anticipated that in the village he would find someone capable of seeing past his armour of lethal efficiency. Mocaccina was the daughter of the village elder. Tall, with a presence that radiated calm and determination. She was not a classic beauty – her face bore the scars of a childhood illness – but her eyes... her eyes were like mirrors of still water in a forest, deep and wise.

Their first meeting was anything but romantic. She confronted him openly, challenging his plan to ambush the raiders.

"Killing is not the only solution," she argued. "These raiders are mostly farmers, driven from their lands by the war. If we offered them a chance to join us, to rebuild, many would accept."

Cappuccino was surprised by her audacity. No one dared to contradict his strategies, much less a village woman with no military training.

"Your compassion makes you blind," he replied coldly. "The men who threaten your village are not desperate farmers. They are killers who have chosen the path of violence. The only language they understand is that of force."

"And you?" Mocaccina retorted, holding his gaze without fear. "What language do you understand, lonely samurai? Only that of your blade?"

The question struck him more deeply than he wanted to admit. For days, as he prepared the village's defences, Mocaccina's words echoed in his mind.

In the end, when the raiders attacked, Cappuccino enacted his plan. But with a crucial difference: he offered the raiders the chance to surrender and join the village, just as Mocaccina had suggested.

Most refused and paid for their choice with their lives. But a few – a dozen or so – accepted the offer. They threw down their weapons and knelt, defeated not so much by Cappuccino's blade as by the prospect of a new life.

That night, sitting by the fire, Cappuccino sensed a presence behind him.

"You were partly right," he admitted without turning, knowing it was Mocaccina. "Some of them were truly just desperate."

"And you were partly right," she replied, sitting beside him. "Others were truly too corrupt to be saved."

They looked at each other, and in that gaze was a mutual understanding. The understanding that is born between two people who have seen beyond their initial convictions.

"Will you stay?" Mocaccina asked.

Cappuccino wanted to say no. He wanted to explain that he was a wanderer, a warrior without a home, a man whose only purpose was revenge against an enemy he might never find.

Instead, against all expectation, he found himself saying: "Yes. For a while."

That "a while" became a month. Then six. Then a year.

The village, which was called Espresso Collinare, became his home. He helped build defenses, organise trade with other settlements, create an alert system against external threats.

And slowly, almost imperceptibly, the armour he had built around his heart began to crack. Mocaccina was the main cause. Her kindness without weakness, her determination without harshness, her ability to see the light even in the darkest of situations – all qualities Cappuccino had forgotten existed.

Their wedding, two years after his arrival in the village, was a simple ceremony. No pomp, just the villagers celebrating the union of two souls who, against all odds, had found each other.

"I never thought this kind of happiness could exist," Cappuccino confessed on their wedding night, holding Mocaccina in his arms.

"It always exists," she replied, tracing the scars on his chest with a finger, silent witnesses to past battles.

"You just have to have the courage to seek it. And to accept it when you find it."

The birth of their first child, a year later, was the moment Cappuccino definitively buried the assassin he had once been. Or so he believed.

They named him Espresso, for his dark, intense eyes. And when Cappuccino held him in his arms for the first time, he swore that this child would never know the violence that had marked his own childhood.

Their happiness seemed complete. The village prospered. Mocaccina was expecting their second child. Cappuccino had become the head of the village's security, respected and loved.

The katana Schiuma di Luna rested in a chest under the bed, almost forgotten.

But fate, like coffee left too long on the stove, can turn bitter in an instant.

It was a day like any other when the lookouts spotted a column of smoke on the horizon. It wasn't uncommon for the woods to catch fire during the dry season, and initially, no one was too concerned.

But Cappuccino felt a shiver of premonition run down his spine. Something was wrong. The smoke was too dark, too intense. And there was something else... a barely perceptible noise in the air. A rumble he knew all too well.

His urgency was contagious. Within minutes, the village was in a flurry of activity, families gathering essentials, children rounded up in the centre of the square, ready to be taken to safety in the caves behind the hill.

Cappuccino ran home to find Mocaccina already preparing a bundle with provisions and medicine.

"What's happening?" she asked, reading the fear in his eyes. A fear she had never seen

before, not even in the face of the gravest threats.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But we have to go. Now."

He took little Espressino, barely two years old, and tied him to Mocaccina's back with a long shawl.

"Go to the caves," he told her. "I'll make sure everyone is evacuated, then I'll join you."

Mocaccina hesitated, a hand on her prominent belly. "Promise me."

"I promise."

A quick, desperate kiss, and then they parted – he toward the centre of the village, she toward the path that led to the caves.

Cappuccino would never forget the look in his wife's eyes at that moment. As if she knew, somehow, that it would be the last time they would see each other.

The rumble grew louder. The sky suddenly darkened, not with clouds, but with the wings of a swarm of flying mosquitoes. An army silhouetted against the sun like an omen of death.

And at its head, a figure Cappuccino had hoped never to see again.

Bombardiro Crocodilo.

Time seemed to stand still as Cappuccino looked up, paralysed by horror and déjà vu. It was as if his worst nightmare was repeating itself, but this time with even more at stake.

It was the cry of a child that brought him back to reality. He had to act. He had to save as many people as possible.

He ran to the chest, drew Schiuma di Luna from its long slumber, and rushed outside, shouting orders to the village militia.

"Protect the escape route! Concentrate defences on the path to the caves! Everyone else, run, don't look back!"

But it was too late. The first bombs began to fall, devastating the wooden houses as if they were made of paper. Screams of terror mingled with the crackling of fire and the roar of explosives.

Cappuccino fought like a demon, his katana reflecting the flames as he carved a path through the ground mercenaries who followed the air raid. For every enemy he cut down, two more took his place. It was a hopeless fight, he knew, but he had to buy time. Time for the weak to escape. Time for Mocaccina and Espressino to reach the caves.

When he finally reached the path, exhausted and covered in wounds, the scene that greeted him broke his heart.

Bombardiro had anticipated their escape strategy. An elite group of his mercenaries had intercepted the fugitives, blocking the passage to the caves.

And in the midst of the chaos, Mocaccina, desperately trying to protect their child.

What happened next would be seared into Cappuccino's mind forever, a brand that no amount of time could ever erase. He saw Mocaccina fighting two mercenaries, using a stick she found on the ground as a makeshift weapon. He saw her strike one of them, with a ferocity born only of a mother's love. He saw her fall when the second mercenary struck her legs.

And then he saw Bombardiro himself approach her, a cruel sneer on his reptilian snout.

Cappuccino screamed. A scream that didn't sound human, a scream that contained all the pain and rage and despair in the world.

Running as he had never run before, he launched himself toward them. But the distance was too great. And there were too many enemies between him and his family.

Bombardiro lifted Mocaccina by the neck, watching her struggle the way a fisherman might watch a freshly caught fish. Then his eyes turned to Cappuccino, as if he knew exactly where he was in the chaotic crowd.

And with a deliberately slow movement, he plunged his claws into Mocaccina's stomach.

Cappuccino's world narrowed to a tunnel of pure fury. He didn't feel the wounds he received as he fought his way toward his wife. He didn't see the bodies he left in his wake. There was only Mocaccina, collapsing to the ground in a pool of her own lifeblood, and Espressino crying desperately beside her.

When he finally reached his wife, Bombardiro was already gone, having moved on to other atrocities. The mercenaries had shifted, following their leader in the village's destruction.

Cappuccino knelt beside Mocaccina, gently cradling her head in his lap. She was still alive, but just barely. Her gaze was already veiled, like water beginning to freeze.

"Espressino," she whispered, a trickle of dark liquid escaping her mouth. "Save him."

"I'll save you both," Cappuccino promised, the tears finally starting to flow, melting the ice of his fury. "Hold on, my love. Hold on."

But Mocaccina weakly shook her head. "It's too late for me. And for..." A weak hand caressed her now-devastated belly. "But not for him. Save him. Promise me."

"I promise," Cappuccino murmured, his voice breaking.

A final smile, a final sigh, and then Mocaccina was gone. Her hand slipped limply from Cappuccino's, like the last petal falling from a flower.

A movement to his left made him snap his head around. Espressino was there, his dark eyes wide with pure terror. He had seen everything. He had seen his mother die.

"Come, little one," Cappuccino said, holding a hand out to his son, trying to control the tremor in his voice. "We have to go."

But before he could reach the child, a shadow fell over them. A shadow with leathery wings and razor-sharp teeth.

Bombardiro had returned.

"What a tender family scene," the crocodile hissed, his cold eyes gleaming with cruelty. "It reminds me of something... ah, yes. Your home village, wasn't it? History repeats itself."

Cappuccino rose slowly, placing himself between Bombardiro and his son. The katana Schiuma di Luna gleamed in his hand, stained with the blood of dozens of enemies.

"Why?" he asked simply. "Why this village? Why my family?"

Bombardiro laughed, a sound like cracking ice. "Why, my dear Cappuccino, or should I call you Goccio? Because you are special. The only survivor of the first village I razed to the ground. A mistake I intend to correct today."

With a movement as fast as lightning, Bombardiro drew a pistol and fired.

Cappuccino moved instinctively to parry the shot, but realised too late that he wasn't the target.

Little Espressino fell backward, a tiny hole in the centre of his forehead. His eyes, so like his father's, went vacant and still in an instant.

Something went off in Cappuccino. Something beyond pain, beyond rage, beyond any human emotion.

With a scream that seemed to emerge not from his throat but from his very soul, he lunged at Bombardiro, his katana tracing lethal arcs in the air. The crocodile parried the blows with increasing difficulty, surprised by his opponent's unchecked fury.

But even the most intense fury cannot compensate for wounds and exhaustion. Cappuccino began to slow, his strikes lost their precision, his guard lowered.

Bombardiro took advantage, striking him with a powerful kick to the chest that sent him crashing against a tree. The katana Schiuma di Luna fell from his hand, landing far from his reach.

"This is how the line of Goccio ends," Bombardiro proclaimed, approaching slowly, savouring the moment. "With a father who failed to protect his family. Just as your parents failed to protect you."

Cappuccino, half-conscious from pain and blood loss, desperately tried to get up. But his body no longer obeyed his commands.

Bombardiro leaned over him, claws ready for the killing blow. "Any last words, samurai?"

"Yes," Cappuccino managed to murmur. "I will find you. In this life or the next. And I will make you pay for every drop of blood spilled."

Bombardiro laughed again. "Good luck with that."

And then, instead of killing him, he did something unexpected. He simply struck him with the butt of his pistol, knocking him unconscious.

"One last gift," he whispered to Cappuccino's inert body. "Life. To carry the weight of your uselessness. To live every day knowing that you failed."

When Cappuccino awoke, the village of Espresso Collinare no longer existed. Only smoking ruins and charred bodies. There was no trace of little Espressino or Mocaccina. Bombardiro had even taken their bodies, denying him the chance for a proper burial.

Something died in Cappuccino that day. The part of him that had learned to hope, to love, to dream of a peaceful future. In its place, something new was born. Something as cold and relentless as the steel of his katana.

Cappuccino Assassino.

No longer a ronin guided by a sense of justice. No longer a protector. Just an instrument of death, as sharp and precise as a barber's razor.

For weeks, he wandered aimlessly, carrying with him only Schiuma di Luna and the unbearable weight of his loss. He didn't sleep, didn't eat, didn't feel. He was a dead man walking among the living.

That was how Espressona Signora, or rather, her men, found him. They brought him before the queen of the underworld, more dead than alive.

"What do we have here?" Espressona asked, studying the emaciated man who stood before her out of sheer pride. "A disgraced samurai?"

"A ghost," Cappuccino replied, his voice hoarse from disuse. "A ghost seeking revenge." Something in his voice, in his empty gaze, struck Espressona. She recognised in him a kindred spirit. Someone who had lost everything and now lived for only one purpose. "Revenge is an expensive luxury," she said. "Do you have the means to pay for it?" "I have a blade," Cappuccino replied simply. "And the will to use it." Espressona smiled, a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Perhaps we can help each other, then. I need someone with your... skills. And you need resources to find your enemy."

Thus was born the alliance between Cappuccino Assassino and Espressona Signora. An alliance based not on affection or loyalty, but on mutual convenience. She provided him with information, contacts, resources. He eliminated her enemies with an efficiency that soon became legendary.

And if, over the years, Cappuccino began to bury the memory of Mocaccina and Espressino deeper and deeper, it was only because the pain was too great to bear. Better to be empty than broken. Better to be cold than vulnerable.

Until, in the Arabica Theatre, a ballerina's eyes rekindled something in his dead heart.

In the present, Cappuccino came down from the roof with a fluid movement, returning to the hiding place where Ballerina was waiting for him. It was strange how the memories of his past, usually so painful to avoid, now seemed like a reminder. A warning of what it meant to lose what you love.

Ballerina was sitting on a crate, studying a map Cappuccino had left for her. She looked up when she heard him enter, a smile lighting up her face.

"Is everything alright?" she asked.

"For now. The smuggler should be here any moment."

He sat down beside her, suddenly aware of her closeness, of her light scent of wildflowers. For so long he had avoided any form of intimacy, any connection. But now...

"You're thinking about something," Ballerina observed. "Something important."

Cappuccino nodded slowly. "About the past. And the future."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

For a long moment, he remained silent. How could he explain? How could he articulate the storm of emotions running through him?

"I lost everything, once," he said at last. "I had a family. A wife, a son. A life I loved."

Ballerina's eyes filled with understanding. "And that's why you became an assassin."

It wasn't a question, but Cappuccino nodded anyway. "When you lose everything, the void that remains can only be filled in two ways: love or hate. I chose hate, because it seemed easier, safer."

"And now?" Ballerina asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"Now," Cappuccino hesitated, searching for the words. "Now I wonder if a second chance is possible. If someone like me can still deserve something other than a life of blood and

shadows."

Ballerina took his hand, a simple gesture heavy with meaning. "Everyone deserves a second chance, Cappuccino. You too. Especially you."

They looked at each other, and in that gaze was everything that words could not express: Fear, hope, desire, uncertainty. And something more, something that neither of them yet dared to name.

"When we are far from here," Cappuccino said, squeezing her hand slightly, "I will no longer be an assassin. I promise you."

"And I will no longer be just a ballerina," she replied. "I'll be whatever I want to be. With you."

A promise. Simple yet profound. A promise of a different future, a future together.

It was a noise in the shadows that broke the moment. Cappuccino sprang to his feet, his katana already half-drawn.

But it was only the smuggler, finally arrived.

"Are you ready?" the man asked, a massive figure wrapped in a thick fur cloak. "The tunnels await us."

Cappuccino and Ballerina exchanged one last look. A look that held the promise just made and so much more.

"We are ready," they replied in unison.

But as they followed the smuggler toward the secret entrance to the tunnels, Cappuccino couldn't help but feel a shiver of unease run down his spine. As if the invisible eyes of fate were watching him, ready to test, once again, the resilience of his newly awakened heart.

5. THE REVELATION

The underground tunnels extended like dark veins beneath the city, a labyrinth of forgotten passages that once served as supply routes during the ancient civil war. Legend has it they were dug by the Stakhanovite fury of Talpa di Ferro. Now they were used mainly by smugglers, fugitives, and anyone who needed to move unnoticed.

The smuggler's faint lantern light cast dancing shadows on the damp walls. The air was thick, saturated with the smells of mould and of the past. The silence, broken only by the sound of their footsteps and the occasional dripping of water, seemed almost solid.

"How much further?" Ballerina whispered, her voice barely audible.

"A couple more hours," the smuggler replied without turning around. "The northern border is the most heavily guarded. We have to take a detour."

Cappuccino walked in silence, his eyes constantly scanning the darkness, all his senses on alert. There was something about these tunnels that awakened a sense of déjà vu in him. An echo of another escape, of another life.

"Have you travelled these tunnels before?" he asked the smuggler in a low voice.

The man nodded. "Hundreds of times. I know them like the back of my hand."

"And have you ever run into... problems?"

The smuggler turned slightly, his profile lit by the faint lantern light. "Occasionally. Nothing I couldn't handle."

Cappuccino was not reassured by that answer. There was something in the man's tone, a note of uncertainty, perhaps? Or was it just his paranoia, honed by years of life as an assassin?

The tunnel suddenly widened into a natural cavern. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like stone fangs, while stalagmites rose from the floor in bizarre formations. The smuggler stopped, looking around.

"Let's rest here a moment," he said. "There's a spring of fresh water."

While Ballerina approached a small pool of crystal-clear water to refresh herself, Cappuccino took the smuggler aside.

"Is there something I should know?" he asked directly, his voice low but intense.

The man hesitated, then sighed. "Maybe. There have been... rumours. In the last few days."

"What kind of rumours?"

"About the tunnels. They say they're not as safe as they used to be. That there are new raiders. Organised. Lethal." The smuggler glanced nervously over Cappuccino's shoulder.

"But they're just rumours, you understand? I haven't seen anything myself."

Cappuccino studied the man, searching for signs of a lie. He found none, but that didn't mean much. The best liars believe their own lies.

"Go on," he said simply.

"They say they're led by a monster. An animal that walks like a man." The smuggler lowered his voice even more. "A crocodile, some whisper."

Cappuccino's blood ran cold in his veins. Bombardiro. Here? Now? Was it possible? Or was it just a coincidence, a superstition born of fear?

"Why didn't you mention this before?" he demanded, his voice dangerously calm.
"Because they're just rumours!" The smuggler raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "And because you paid me double the normal rate. For that price, I'd run worse risks."

Cappuccino clenched his fists, suppressing the urge to draw his katana. Killing the smuggler now wouldn't solve anything. In fact, without him, finding the way out of the tunnels would be much more difficult.

"From now on," he said, "every suspicious noise, every shadow out of place, you tell me immediately. Understood?"

The smuggler nodded quickly, his face pale in the faint light.

Cappuccino returned to Ballerina, who had finished refreshing herself and was watching him with an inquisitive look.

"Problems?" she asked.

"Maybe," Cappuccino admitted. "Keep your eyes open. And stay close to me."

They resumed their journey, the atmosphere now as taut as an overtightened violin string. The silence seemed deeper, the shadows thicker, every drop of water a possible sign of danger.

It was during this tense silence that Ballerina asked the question she had been keeping to herself since their escape from the theatre.

"You told me about your past," she whispered, so close that her breath brushed against his ear. "But there's a part of the story that's missing. Bombardiro Crocodilo. Who is he, really? And why did he do this to you?"

Cappuccino remained silent for so long that Ballerina thought he wouldn't answer. But then, almost imperceptibly, he began to speak.

The Twenty Years' War had no official name at first. It was just another conflict in a region that had seen too many. A territorial dispute, perhaps. Or a religious feud. Or a simple thirst for power. As time went on, the original reasons were lost, replaced by revenge and counterattacks, in a seemingly endless spiral of violence.

But every war has its heroes and its monsters. And in this one, two figures emerged from the shadows to define an era of blood and fire.

General Struzzobardo, a high-ranking officer with a sharp beak and eyes as hard as stone, earned the reputation of a brilliant but ruthless strategist. His troops were disciplined, his tactics innovative, his determination unshakeable.

On the other side was Bombardiro Crocodilo, a mercenary who had climbed the ranks through a combination of cunning, brutality, and sheer ambition. His tactics knew no moral limits, his soldiers were loyal to the point of fanaticism, his enemies did not survive long enough to tell of his atrocities.

At first, they were allies. United against a common enemy, the tyranny of Boneca Ambalabu, a dictator who had held the region in a grip of terror for decades. Struzzobardo provided the

strategy, Bombardiro the brutal but effective execution.

Their alliance led to decisive victories. Fortresses once considered impregnable fell. Enemy generals who had never known defeat surrendered or were eliminated. The tyranny of Boneca Ambalabu wavered, then collapsed.

But victory, as often happens, carried with it the seeds of future conflict.

With their common enemy defeated, the differences between Struzzobardo and Bombardiro became increasingly apparent. The former wanted to establish a transitional government, prepare for elections, and rebuild institutions. The latter saw an opportunity for a new kind of power, total control based on fear and brute force.

The final break, however, came for a much more personal reason.

Bombombini Gusini, a fearless war hero, a noble goose, protector of the skies, was Bombardiro's younger brother. The two had been inseparable since childhood, united by a bond that transcended blood. Where one went, the other followed. Bombardiro, the ruthless ground warrior; Gusini, the noble and idealistic ace pilot.

Gusini was married to Barattolina Dalmata, a delicate and intelligent beauty who managed the field hospitals. Struzzobardo, sent to inspect the medical facilities, was immediately struck not only by her efficiency, but also by her beauty and her spirit.

What began as professional admiration soon turned into something deeper. And, in a moment of weakness, both gave in to feelings they knew were forbidden.

Bombardiro discovered the affair almost immediately. His agents were everywhere, his eyes and ears recording every whisper, every glance, every hurried breath.

The reaction was immediate and devastating. Struzzobardo was publicly accused of treason, not only against a brother-in-arms, but against the entire cause. The evidence, expertly manipulated, suggested he was plotting with the remnants of Boneca Ambalabu's regime.

A court-martial was hastily convened. The sentence was already written before the trial even began. Struzzobardo was sentenced to death by firing squad.

But the night before the execution, something unexpected happened. The guards were found unconscious, the cell empty. Struzzobardo had disappeared.

Bombardiro's fury knew no bounds. He ordered a nationwide manhunt. He placed bounties on Struzzobardo's head so high that entire families could have lived for generations on the sum. The reptile thirsted for destruction.

And then he turned toward the easiest target: his own brother.

Gusini had always known Bombardiro could be cruel. But he had never imagined that cruelty could be directed at him. The two brothers faced off in a confrontation that the few witnesses described as "apocalyptic". Words as sharp as razors. Accusations that went far beyond the current situation, going back to old wounds that had never truly healed.

"You are not a soldier," Gusini finally shouted. "You are a monster. And I will no longer fight for a monster."

With these words, Gusini turned his back on his brother and walked away. That same night, he and Barattolina fled, joining the underground resistance that was already forming around Struzzobardo.

The war, which everyone had thought was over, erupted again with renewed ferocity. But this time it was not two allies against a common enemy. It was two brothers fighting each other, dragging the entire region into a vortex of blood that would last for another fifteen years.

A war that would devastate cities, destroy families, wipe out entire communities.

A war that would lead Bombardiro Crocodilo to the small village of a child named Goccio, forever changing the course of his life.

In the darkness of the tunnels, Cappuccino's voice was low but clear, as if he were telling not his own story, but that of a stranger. A necessary detachment, perhaps, to bear the weight of the memories.

"After the destruction of Espresso Collinare, I wandered for weeks. Perhaps months. Time had lost its meaning. I was just an empty cup, driven only by the desire for revenge."

Ballerina listened in silence, her face illuminated by the faint lantern light, her eyes fixed on Cappuccino as if memorizing every word.

"It was Espressona who found me. Or rather, her informants. They had heard of a mad samurai who killed raiders and bandits with a ferocity bordering on madness. A man who did not speak, did not sleep, showed no emotion except in the brief moment his katana took a life."

"You weren't yourself anymore," Ballerina murmured.

"I was no one anymore," Cappuccino corrected. "Just an instrument of death. And instruments have no identity, only a function."

The smuggler, walking a few paces ahead of them, deliberately ignored them, focused on the path as if the conversation behind him did not exist. But Cappuccino noticed how his shoulders would occasionally tense, as if certain parts of the story affected him more than others.

"Espressona saw an opportunity in me. A weapon that could be aimed, controlled. She offered me resources, information, legal protection. In return, I was to eliminate her enemies. A simple, direct proposal."

"And you accepted."

"Yes. Not because I cared about money or power. But because she had a network of informants that covered the entire continent. If anyone could help me find Bombardiro, it was her."

Cappuccino paused, as if deciding how much to reveal. Then, with an almost imperceptible sigh, he continued.

"My first assignment was the elimination of one of Espressona's rivals in the spice trade. A man who had built a small empire through intimidation and corruption. He had guards, security systems, informants. He was practically untouchable."

"But not for you," Ballerina said, and it wasn't a question.

"I found him in his villa in the centre of the city. Protected by twenty armed men, three-metre-high walls, guard dogs. I entered like a shadow. No alarms, no witnesses. His

death was quick, silent. When his men found him the next morning, they thought he had died in his sleep."

Cappuccino spoke without emotion, describing the murder as a craftsman might describe the creation of a piece of furniture. With technical precision, without personal involvement. "The rumours began to spread. A new player in the city. A ghost who struck without being seen and disappeared without a trace. Espressona deliberately fuelled these rumours. Terror is a form of control as effective as direct violence."

Ballerina nodded slowly, understanding the perverse logic of such a strategy.

"Over the next two years, I eliminated seventeen targets for Espressona. Criminals, for the most part. Some corrupt government officials. A judge who couldn't be bought. Never innocents. That was my only limit, the only rule I imposed on myself. And Espressona respected it, if only because it was convenient."

"And Bombardiro? Did you find him?"

Cappuccino slowly shook his head. "Traces, reports, sightings. Never anything concrete. Like chasing the wind. Until, one day, after nearly three years of hunting, Espressona summoned me to her private study. 'I've found him,' she said. 'I know where he's hiding.'"

"And you went."

"Immediately. He was in a fortress in the northern mountains. An almost inaccessible place, defended by nature as much as by men. It took me four days to reach it, another two to study the terrain, identify the weak points, plan the attack."

Cappuccino stopped suddenly, as if struck by a thought. "It was too easy," he said, almost speaking to himself. "I should have realised it then. It was too easy."

"What do you mean?"

"The infiltration. The defences, yes, they were formidable. But there were flaws.

Unsupervised paths. Guards missing from their posts at crucial moments. As if... as if someone had prepared the way for me."

Ballerina looked at him with growing understanding. "A trap?"

"Or a test. I still don't know. I only know that when I finally reached Bombardiro's chamber, he was awake. Waiting for me, sitting in an armchair, a glass of liquor in his hand. As if I were an expected guest, not an assassin coming to kill him."

"What did he say?"

"'The son of the burned village,' he said. 'You've grown up. And you've become exactly what I had hoped.' I didn't understand what he meant then. I was too blinded by rage, by the thirst for revenge. I attacked immediately."

Cappuccino remembered every detail of that night. The moonlight filtering through the high windows. The smell of burnt wood and fine liquor. Bombardiro's almost fatherly smile, as if he were witnessing the debut of a favourite son.

"It was a brutal fight. My fury against his experience. My technique against his brute force. In the end, I managed to plunge Schiuma di Luna into his chest. I saw him collapse, blood trickling from his mouth. His last words were: 'Well done, son. Well done.'"

"But he didn't die," Ballerina deduced.

"No. Though I believed he did at the time. I left the fortress certain that I had avenged my

family, my village. That I had finally closed that chapter of my life."

"And you returned to Espressona."

"Yes. Bringing the news that Bombardiro Crocodilo was dead. I expected... I don't know what I expected. Gratitude? Recognition? Perhaps just a nod of understanding for the weight I had carried for so long."

"But that's not what happened," Ballerina guessed.

"Her reaction was strange. Not surprised, not pleased. Almost... disappointed. As if the news of Bombardiro's death were an inconvenience, not a triumph."

Cappuccino shook his head. "I should have understood then that there was much more going on than I could see. But I was... exhausted. Emotionally drained. Revenge, which had been my sole purpose for so long, was accomplished. And I no longer knew who I was or what I should do."

"That's when you truly became Cappuccino Assassino," Ballerina said. "Not when you lost your family, but when you lost your purpose."

Cappuccino looked at her with a new awareness. "Yes," he admitted. "That's exactly it.

Without a purpose, I simply became a tool in Espressona's hands. Efficient. Lethal. Empty."

"Until you saw me dance," Ballerina added softly.

"Until I saw you dance," Cappuccino confirmed, and in the darkness of the tunnel, his lips curved into something that almost resembled a smile.

The smuggler, who had maintained a respectful silence throughout the story, suddenly stopped. He raised the lantern, illuminating a fork in the tunnel.

"We have to decide," he said. "The path on the left is longer but safer. The one on the right is a direct route to the exit, but..." he hesitated, "it's the territory I told you about. The one the rumours say is now controlled by... new raiders."

Cappuccino looked at Ballerina, then at the smuggler. "How much longer is the path on the left?"

"At least three more hours."

"And the right?"

"An hour, maybe less. But the risk..."

"We'll take the right," Cappuccino decided. "The faster we get out of these tunnels, the better."

The smuggler looked like he wanted to protest, but he just nodded in resignation. "As you wish. But keep your hand on your katana."

They turned right, into a tunnel narrower and lower than the one they had been travelling. The air was heavier here, almost suffocating. The walls seemed to press in on them from all sides, as if the passage itself were trying to push them back.

It was then that Cappuccino felt it. A noise so faint it was almost lost in the dripping of water. A rustle, perhaps. Or a controlled breath. The sound of someone – or something – moving in the shadows, parallel to their path.

They were not alone in the tunnels.

The smuggler quickened his pace, the lantern swinging wildly in his hand, casting distorted shadows on the tunnel walls. Cappuccino immediately noticed the change in his behaviour – the tension in his shoulders, his gaze darting nervously from one spot to another, his ragged breathing.

"Slow down, Matteo!" Cappuccino ordered, his voice low but firm. "You're drawing attention."

"We have to hurry," the man insisted. "This stretch isn't safe."

"No stretch is safe if we run like fleeing prey," Cappuccino countered. "Slow down. Now." Reluctantly, the smuggler reduced his pace, but his agitation was palpable. Cappuccino moved closer to Ballerina, who had maintained an admirable calm despite the rising tension.

"Something's wrong," he whispered to her. "Be ready."

She nodded imperceptibly, her eyes already searching for possible escape routes or hiding places. Her training as a ballerina had given her not only grace, but also an extraordinary spatial and bodily awareness. In that moment, Cappuccino was grateful for it.

The tunnel suddenly widened, opening into a natural cavern larger than the one where they had stopped before. Stalactites and stalagmites created an alien landscape, while a small underground stream crossed the stone floor, shimmering like liquid silver in the lantern's light.

"We're halfway there," the smuggler announced, his voice suddenly louder than necessary.

"After this cavern, the tunnel climbs toward the surface. Another half hour and we'll be out." Cappuccino studied the cavern with a critical eye. Too many blind corners. Too many shadows. Too many opportunities for an ambush.

"Wait," he said, stopping the smuggler with a hand on his arm. "I want to check first."

The man tensed under his touch. "There's no need. I know these tunnels like—"

"The back of your hand, yes, you already said that," Cappuccino interrupted. "But I'd prefer to check for myself."

With a fluid motion, Cappuccino drew his katana from its sheath. The blade caught the lantern light, gleaming like a fallen star.

It was in that moment that everything fell apart.

The smuggler broke free from Cappuccino's grip with surprising strength, leaping back and throwing the lantern to the ground. The glass shattered, the oil spread and caught fire, creating a sudden wall of flames between them.

"I'm sorry!" the man shouted from the other side of the fire. "I had no choice!"

Before Cappuccino could react, sounds came from every corner of the cavern. Figures emerged from the shadows, armed and menacing. At least a dozen, maybe more.

Mercenaries, judging by their mismatched equipment and the professional way they arranged themselves in an attack formation.

"Ballerina," Cappuccino said, his voice calm despite the desperate situation, "when I say 'now,' you run toward the tunnel on the left. Don't stop, don't look back. Keep running until you see daylight."

"No," she replied with surprising firmness. "I'm not leaving you."

There was no time to argue. The mercenaries were closing in, tightening the circle around them.

"Alive or dead, it's all the same to us," said one of them, clearly the leader. "But we'd prefer alive. Less messy."

Cappuccino quickly calculated the odds. In an open space, he could have taken on three, maybe four at once. In this cavern, with stalactites limiting his movements and the need to protect Ballerina, the chances were drastically reduced.

But he had no other choice.

With a cry that seemed to come from his very soul, Cappuccino lunged forward, his katana tracing lethal arcs in the air. The first mercenary fell before he could even raise his weapon. The second lost an arm. The third managed to parry the blow with his sword, but the force of the impact sent him stumbling backward.

"NOW!" Cappuccino yelled to Ballerina, as he spun quickly to face two more attackers.

For a moment, it seemed she would disobey. But then, understanding that her presence would only hinder Cappuccino, she turned and ran toward the indicated tunnel.

Two mercenaries broke off from the main group to chase her. Cappuccino tried to intercept them, but was blocked by a coordinated attack that forced him onto the defensive.

"Let her go," the mercenary leader said with a cold smile. "She won't get far. The tunnels are all guarded."

Cappuccino didn't reply. Focused, he calculated every move, every step, every breath. The katana Schiuma di Luna had become an extension of his body, a silver arc that drew death in the suffocating air of the cavern.

But even the greatest swordsman has his limits. And when a tranquilliser dart hit him in the shoulder, fired by a mercenary hidden on a ledge above, Cappuccino knew the battle was lost.

He fought against the numbness spreading rapidly through his body. Three more mercenaries fell to his blade before his movements began to slow, to become imprecise.

"He's still standing?" he heard someone exclaim in disbelief. "How much of that stuff did you give him?"

"Enough to take down a rhinoceros," another voice replied.

Cappuccino staggered, his vision blurring. The katana slipped from his numb fingers, clattering on the stone. He fell to his knees, then to the ground, his cheek pressed against the cold, damp rock.

His last thought, before the darkness completely engulfed him, was for Ballerina. He just hoped she had managed to escape. That she had found the way to the surface, to freedom. To the life he had promised her and that now seemed more distant than ever.

The last thing he saw, or thought he saw, was a massive figure approaching slowly. A figure with a long reptilian snout and eyes that gleamed with cruel intelligence in the cavern's gloom.

"Welcome back to the world of the living, my son," said a voice Cappuccino knew all too well. "We have much to discuss, you and I."

Then, nothing.

6. THE BETRAYAL

Darkness was the first thing Cappuccino perceived when he regained consciousness. Not the darkness of the tunnels, but the deeper, impenetrable black of a windowless room.

The second was pain. Subtle, persistent, scientifically applied – the kind of pain designed not to break the body, but to slowly erode the will.

He tried to move, only to discover he was bound to a chair. Wrists, ankles, chest – all immobilised with professional precision. Whoever had captured him knew their trade. His mind, still foggy from the sedative, struggled to piece together the events. The tunnel. The ambush. The smuggler betraying them. Ballerina fleeing through a side passage. And then... that voice. That impossible voice.

"Bombardiro," he murmured into the darkness, his throat as dry as after drinking boiling coffee.

"Oh, if only it were him," a female voice replied, as familiar as it was unexpected. "It would have been much simpler, don't you think?"

A light suddenly switched on, blinding him. When his eyes adjusted, he saw Espressona Signora sitting across from him, elegant as ever in her black dress, her legs crossed nonchalantly, as if they were simply chatting in a café and not in what he now recognised as an interrogation cell.

"Espressona," he said, without surprise. A part of him already knew.

"My favourite assassin," she smiled, but the smile did not reach her eyes. "Or should I say, my *former* favourite assassin?"

"Where are we?"

"On my private property outside the city. Far from prying eyes and curious ears. The perfect place for a... frank conversation."

Cappuccino studied the room. No windows, a single door, probably guarded from the outside. Raw concrete walls, a stone floor. A table between him and Espressona, on which various instruments he preferred not to examine too closely were neatly arranged.

"Where is Ballerina?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"My darling little sister?" Espressona spread her hands in a theatrical gesture. "Who can say? Perhaps she managed to escape the tunnels. Perhaps she was captured by someone else. Or perhaps," her smile grew sharper, "perhaps she is exactly where I wanted her to be."

Cappuccino maintained an impassive expression, but inside, his worry grew. He had hoped that Ballerina had managed to escape the trap. Now he was no longer so sure.

"Why all this, Espressona? Why not simply eliminate me, if that's what you wanted?"

"Eliminate you?" Espressona seemed genuinely surprised. "Oh no, my dear. I don't want to eliminate you. You're far too valuable."

She rose with feline grace and approached him, stopping just inches away. "I want to understand. I want to know what happened to my relentless assassin. To the man who asked no questions, who showed no emotion, who completed every mission to perfection." She leaned in, whispering almost against his ear. "I want to know how my sister managed to

break you, when not even the loss of your family could."

Cappuccino remained silent, his face a mask of indifference that contrasted with his inner turmoil.

"Did you really think I didn't know?" Espressona continued, returning to the table. "About your family in Espresso Collinare? About Mocaccina and little Espressino? About the unborn child?" She shook her head with feigned compassion. "I have always known everything about you, Cappuccino. That's why I chose you."

"You chose me," he repeated, an intuition taking shape. "You didn't find me by chance."

"Chance is for fools and dreamers. I create my own opportunities." Espressona picked something up from the table – a photograph, Cappuccino noted. "I knew who you were the moment my men brought you before me. The sole survivor of the village destroyed by Bombardiro Crocodilo. The prodigy of the Dojo of the Silent Drop. The samurai who had found peace only to lose it again."

She tossed the photograph onto the table, turning it toward him. It was an image of a very young Cappuccino, still at the dojo, training under the watchful eye of Maestro Matcha.

"How...?" he began, genuinely surprised.

"I have eyes and ears everywhere. And Maestro Matcha and I... let's just say we have a shared history." Espressona's smile was now that of a predator. "Surprised? You shouldn't be. In this world, everything is connected. Every thread, if pulled in the right way, reveals an entire tapestry."

She sat on the edge of the table, studying him with clinical attention. "But let's return to the original question. What did my sister do to break years of perfect conditioning? To turn my deadliest weapon into a... what? A romantic knight? A redeemed hero?"

"She didn't break me," Cappuccino finally answered. "She reminded me of who I was before the pain transformed me. Before you used me."

Espressona laughed, a melodious sound that echoed ominously in the cell. "Oh, Cappuccino. I didn't use you. I saved you. I gave you a purpose when you were wandering aimlessly. I gave you targets when the only alternative was suicide." She leaned toward him. "I gave you Bombardiro."

At these words, Cappuccino's head snapped up.

"Ah, now I have your full attention," Espressona smiled. "Yes, I gave you Bombardiro. On a silver platter. With all the information necessary to find him, infiltrate his fortress, and face him."

"It was a trap," Cappuccino realised, the pieces finally clicking into place. "I didn't know, but you did. You knew he was alive."

"Of course," Espressona confirmed nonchalantly. "It was all part of the plan. His and mine." This revelation hit Cappuccino like a punch to the gut. "You and Bombardiro... you work together?"

Espressona seemed to consider the question. "Working together is an imprecise term. Let's say we have... aligned interests, occasionally. And you, my dear, have always been at the centre of those interests."

She rose again, circling the table with deliberately slow movements. "You see, Bombardiro has always had a special interest in you. Ever since you were a child in your home village. It was no accident he was there that day. It was no accident that you were the sole survivor."

"Why?" The question came out almost as a snarl.

"Because he saw potential in you. The same potential I saw years later. A controlled fury. A lethal precision. An unshakeable will." Espressona shook her head slightly, like a teacher disappointed in a promising student. "A pity that all of this has been... diluted by your infatuation with my sister."

Cappuccino gritted his teeth, struggling to maintain control. "What do you want from me, Espressona?"

"I want you to go back to being what you were meant to be. My weapon. My assassin." She stopped in front of him, leaning down to look him in the eyes. "And to do that, I must eliminate the distraction. I must break this... bond that has made you weak."

"If you touch Ballerina—"

"What?" Espressona interrupted, amused. "What will you do, tied to that chair? But don't worry. I have no intention of harming her. There's no need."

She moved away, returning to the table where she picked up another photograph. "You see, there's a much more elegant way to resolve this situation. A way that doesn't require violence, but only... the truth. Or a version of it."

She showed the photograph to Cappuccino. It was an image of him and Espressona, seemingly in an intimate moment. He knew it was fake – a composite, and not a particularly sophisticated one – but crafted with enough skill to fool someone who wasn't an expert.

"What do you think my sweet little sister will feel when she sees this?" Espressona asked with feigned innocence. "When she discovers that the man she thought was her saviour was actually toying with her feelings? That it was all part of an elaborate plan between you and me?"

"She won't believe you," Cappuccino said, but his voice betrayed an uncertainty that did not escape Espressona.

"No? Perhaps you're right." She put down the first photograph and picked up another. And another. A whole series of faked images, each more convincing than the last, documenting a secret relationship between him and Espressona.

"I prepared these weeks ago," she explained. "An insurance policy, let's say. In case my favourite weapon developed... inappropriate feelings."

"It's useless," Cappuccino insisted. "Ballerina knows the truth. She knows who I am."

"Does she?" Espressona's smile widened. "And who are you, exactly? The honourable samurai who lost his way? Or the soulless assassin who eliminated seventeen people for me without a single question? The devoted husband who failed to protect his family? Or the man who sold himself for the promise of revenge?"

Every word was like a needle, precise and painful, aimed exactly at Cappuccino's deepest insecurities.

"I wonder," Espressona continued, merciless, "what Ballerina would think if she really knew

your whole story. Every sordid detail, every moral compromise, every life you have taken. I wonder if her love – because it is love, isn't it? – would survive such a revelation."

Cappuccino did not answer. He couldn't. Because the truth was, he wondered too.

"But don't worry," Espressona said, placing the photographs in a folder. "We'll have an answer soon. My men are already looking for Ballerina. And when they find her, they will deliver these to her, along with a very touching letter from you. A confession. A farewell." She leaned over him again, her voice now an intimate whisper. "And when her heart is broken, when she feels betrayed and abandoned, do you know where she will go? To whom she will seek comfort?"

Cappuccino knew. And the knowledge burned inside him like acid.

"Lololo," he murmured.

"Exactly!" Espressona clapped her hands, pleased. "Her first love. The dancer with the heart of ice. Who, as it happens, is also one of my most loyal informants." She saw Cappuccino's surprised expression and laughed. "Oh, you didn't know? Lololo has been working for me for years. It was he who reported my sister's every step, every breath to me. Her every success, her every vulnerability."

She straightened up, satisfied with the effect of her words. "So, you see, everything fits together perfectly. You will return to your role as an assassin. My sister will find comfort in the arms of a man who secretly reports her every move to me. And I," she paused dramatically, "I will remain in control. As always."

Cappuccino closed his eyes, trying to control the rage that threatened to overwhelm him. He couldn't afford it. Not now. He needed to stay clear-headed, to think.

"And Bombardiro?" he finally asked, opening his eyes again. "What is his role in all this?"

"Bombardiro has his own plans," Espressona answered vaguely. "Plans that, for the moment, coincide with mine. Let's just say we have an agreement of mutual convenience."

She walked toward the door, then stopped. "I'll leave you to the care of my... assistants. They have precise instructions on how to... persuade you back to reason." Her smile was icy.

"Don't worry, they won't damage you permanently. You're too valuable for that. But when they are finished, the Cappuccino Assassino that everyone knows and fears will have returned. And this momentary... malfunction will be just a distant memory."

With those words, she left, letting in two unsavoury-looking men. One carried a metal briefcase that he methodically opened on the table, revealing a series of instruments Cappuccino knew all too well. Instruments of persuasion.

"Nothing personal, friend," the man said with a smile that contradicted his words. "Just business."

Pain had become a constant companion for Cappuccino in the hours – or days, he had lost count – that followed. But it wasn't the physical pain that worried him. He could endure that; he had been trained for it. It was the mental torture that was slowly wearing him down.

Espressona's men were experts. Every hour, they showed him new photographs of Ballerina. At first, simple images of her wandering the city, seemingly disoriented. Then images of her receiving the folder with the forged photos. The pain in her eyes was so vivid, so real, that

Cappuccino had to constantly remind himself it was all a setup. Because it had to be a setup. Ballerina couldn't have been caught. She couldn't have seen those photos. She couldn't believe in that betrayal.

And yet, as the days passed, doubt began to creep in. What if it were true? What if Espressona had really found her? What if Ballerina, seeing those images, had actually believed the lie?

This thought, more than the electric shocks, more than the sleep deprivation, more than the other methods used by his tormentors, was slowly eroding his resistance.

"That's enough for today," one of the torturers said, putting away his instruments. "The boss wants you to reflect on the latest news."

The latest "news" was a newspaper article, apparently torn from that day's edition, announcing the surprise return of the celebrated dancer Lololo, and his artistic reunion with a "mysterious partner" whom many suspected to be Ballerina Cappuccina, despite her supposed death.

The article suggested that the two had been seen together in situations that went far beyond professional collaboration. Cappuccino knew that this too was probably fake. Another psychological ploy to break his resistance. And yet...

And yet a small seed of doubt had been planted. And in soil as fertile as his exhausted and tormented mind, that seed threatened to sprout into a poisonous plant of despair.

When the torturers left the room, turning off the light behind them, Cappuccino was left alone in the darkness with his thoughts. And it was those thoughts, more than any physical pain, that threatened to break him.

Lololo's home was exactly as Ballerina remembered it: an elegant apartment in the upper part of the city, furnished with a minimalist taste that reflected its owner's personality. Essential. Precise. Cold.

"Ballerina Cappuccina," Lololo said when he opened the door, his voice surprisingly calm for someone faced with a person who was officially dead. "I must admit, this is a surprise."

"May I come in?" she asked, glancing nervously over her shoulder. "It's not safe to stay out here."

Lololo hesitated for only an instant, then stepped aside. "Of course."

The apartment was as immaculate as ever. Not a speck of dust, not an object out of place. Like a perfectly set stage, waiting for the performance to begin.

"Everyone believes you're dead," Lololo said, offering her a seat on the pristine white sofa. Ballerina almost felt guilty sitting down, afraid of staining it with the soiled clothes from her escape.

"I know," she replied. "It's... complicated."

"I imagine so." Lololo studied her with clinical attention. "You're in trouble. You need help."

It wasn't a question, but Ballerina nodded anyway. "My sister... Espressona... is trying to kill me. And she captured," she hesitated, unsure of how much to reveal, "a friend who was helping me escape."

"Cappuccino Assassino," Lololo said, surprising her.

"How do you know that?"

A shadow crossed the dancer's face, so quickly that Ballerina almost thought she had imagined it. "Rumours travel fast in the city's underworld. Especially when they involve Espressona's most feared assassin and his supposed victim, miraculously alive."

Lololo stood up, going to pour two glasses of wine from a crystal decanter. He offered one to Ballerina. "What I don't understand is why you came to me. We didn't part on good terms, if I recall correctly."

"I didn't know who else to turn to," Ballerina admitted, accepting the glass but not drinking from it. "And despite everything, you were... important to me."

"Ah," Lololo smiled, a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "First love. It's hard to forget, isn't it?" Ballerina didn't answer directly. "I need help finding Cappuccino. I know you have contacts, influence. People who owe you favours."

"And why should I help you? Why should I go against Espressona Signora for an assassin and a dead ballerina?"

"Because I was your friend once, too," Ballerina answered simply. "And because it's the right thing to do."

Lololo laughed, a sound that rang strangely empty in the minimalist apartment. "The right thing. An interesting concept, in a city like this."

He moved closer to her, studying her with a look that made her feel suddenly vulnerable.

"You know, there's something I never understood about you, Ballerina. Your naivety. Your persistent belief that good still exists in the world. That people do things for noble reasons, not for convenience or necessity."

He took something from a drawer – a folder that Ballerina recognised with a shiver of foreboding. The same folder that Espressona had shown to Cappuccino.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Lololo continued, placing the folder on the small table between them. "I will show you the truth. And then you will decide if your trust in Cappuccino Assassino is well-placed."

With fingers that suddenly felt numb, Ballerina opened the folder. And her world collapsed.

The Assassin's Escape

The moment had finally come. After days – or perhaps weeks – of captivity and torture, the torturers had made a mistake. A small, almost insignificant mistake. But for an assassin as trained as Cappuccino, it was enough.

During the last "treatment", one of them had dropped a small metal tool – a pair of pincers used for nails – just out of reach of the chair where Cappuccino was tied. They hadn't noticed, and he was careful not to point it out.

He had waited patiently for them to leave the room, then had begun the slow, painful process of reaching it. Hours of minimal, imperceptible effort to shift the chair millimetre by millimetre toward the tool.

When he finally managed to grasp it with his toes, he almost cried with relief. Then began the laborious process of bringing it to his hands, which were tied behind his back.

The restraints were professional, but not unbreakable. Especially not for someone trained at the Dojo of the Silent Drop, where one of the first lessons was precisely how to free oneself from various types of bonds.

With the pincers between his fingers, Cappuccino began to work on the lock of the handcuffs. It was delicate work, made even more difficult by the pain pulsing through every part of his body and the need to maintain absolute silence.

A click. Then another. The handcuffs sprang open.

With his hands free, liberating the rest of his body was relatively simple. In a few minutes, Cappuccino was on his feet, massaging his sore wrists, assessing the situation.

The door was locked, of course. But the cell walls were made of rough concrete, with small imperfections that an expert climber could exploit. And the ventilation grate on the ceiling... that was definitely promising.

Using the table and chair as an improvised support, Cappuccino reached the grate. With the pincers, he removed the screws holding it in place. Then, with an effort that made every muscle in his tortured body protest, he hoisted himself into the ventilation duct.

It was narrow, dusty, and dark, but to him, it represented freedom. He moved silently, orienting himself by instinct and by the slight movement of air that suggested the direction of the outside.

After what seemed like an eternity of crawling in the dark, he finally saw a light. Another grate, which opened onto what appeared to be a garden.

He observed carefully through the slats. It was night. The garden seemed deserted, except for a guard lazily patrolling the perimeter, smoking a cigarette with a bored air.

With the same meticulous attention, Cappuccino removed the grate. Then he waited for the guard to move far enough away, and he slipped out, landing silently on the grass.

He moved like a shadow through the garden, using every bush, every tree as cover. The guard noticed nothing, too focused on his cigarette and his thoughts.

The perimeter wall was high, but it posed no obstacle for someone with Cappuccino's abilities. With a leap and a sure grip, he was at the top, and then over to the other side, disappearing into the night.

He was free. But freedom, in that moment, meant very little. He had to find Ballerina. He had to disprove Espressona's lies. He had to...

A sudden thought stopped him in his tracks. What if they weren't lies? What if Ballerina had really seen those photos? And what if she really had sought comfort from Lololo?

No. He couldn't afford to doubt now. He had to focus on the immediate objective: reach the city, find Ballerina, explain everything.

With renewed determination, Cappuccino headed toward the distant lights of the city,

ignoring the pain, the fatigue, the dehydration. None of it mattered.

Only Ballerina mattered. And the promise he had made her.
A promise that, despite everything, he intended to keep.

From a high branch of a tree near the property, a figure observed Cappuccino's escape with clinical interest. His raincoat fluttered slightly in the night breeze as he noted every detail in his trusted notebook.

The plot was thickening. The characters moved like pawns on an invisible chessboard, each following their own path, unaware of the larger design.

Ballerina, seeking comfort from one who might betray her further.

Cappuccino, fleeing toward a city full of enemies, guided only by his faith in a newly blossomed love.

Espressona, weaving her web of deceit, herself unaware she was a pawn in a larger game.

And Bombardiro, waiting in the shadows, as patient as only a predator can be.

The observer closed his notebook, meditating on what he had seen. There were still mysteries to be unveiled, many connections to be discovered.

Because the truth, like good coffee, needs time to reveal its full aroma...

7. THE POISON

The morning light filtered through the sheer curtains, creating a delicate play of shadows on the wall. Ballerina stared at the ceiling, motionless on Lololo's bed. Two weeks had passed since she had knocked on his door, desperate, seeking refuge. Two weeks since she had seen the photographs that had shattered her world.

Two weeks since Lololo had come back into her life. And into her bed.

The thought made her shudder. Not with pleasure, but with self-loathing. How could she have? How could she have doubted Cappuccino so easily, after everything they had shared? But the images had been so convincing. Cappuccino and Espressona, together. Embraces, knowing glances, even kisses. An entire story documented in detail, showing a long and premeditated betrayal.

And those words in the letter, apparently written in his own hand: *"It was just a game. A way to get to you. I'm sorry if you believed it could be real."*

She had cried for days. Then, like a dam breaking, sadness had given way to anger. And anger had pushed her into Lololo's arms. An act of revenge that had done nothing but leave a greater emptiness inside her.

In the next room, Lololo was getting ready. She could hear the shower running, the steady, almost hypnotic sound that accompanied her swirling thoughts.

The night before, while he was performing at the Arabica Theatre, she had snooped around his study. She didn't know exactly what she was looking for – perhaps proof that the photographs were fake, that it was all a lie – but what she had found had shaken her even more deeply.

In a locked drawer, which she had opened with a hairpin (a skill she had learned from Cappuccino during their days on the run), there were letters. Communications between Lololo and Espressona. Some years old. All of them proving that he had always been an informant in her sister's service.

"Keep an eye on her," Espressona wrote in a letter dated two years earlier. *"Every piece of information is valuable."*

And then, in a more recent communication: *"The plan is proceeding as expected. If she seeks you out, show her the photographs. She must believe he betrayed her."*

The plan. It had all been a plan. The photographs, Cappuccino's apparent capture, even the comfort Lololo had offered her. An elaborate trap orchestrated by Espressona.

But why? To separate her from Cappuccino? Or was there something bigger at play?

Ballerina placed a hand on her stomach. There was nothing visible yet, but the morning sickness of the past few days left no room for doubt.

She was pregnant.

She had found out only the day before, after buying a test from a pharmacy far from the city centre, where no one would recognise her. She had waited for the results in a deserted alley, her heart pounding.

Positive.

A child. Lololo's child. The thought brought a lump to her throat. Not because of the child itself – she already felt a protective instinct for that newly formed life – but because of the circumstances in which it had been conceived. A moment of weakness, of anger, of a desire to avenge a betrayal that, she now knew, had never existed.

The shower stopped. Soon Lololo would be back in the room. She had to decide what to do. Three options: she could stay, pretending to know nothing, hoping to gather more information and perhaps, one day, to escape. She could confront him, hoping there was still a spark of the man she had loved long ago. Or she could leave, now, and try to find Cappuccino before it was too late.

The bathroom door opened. Lololo appeared, a towel wrapped around his waist, his hair still damp. He was smiling, as always. That smile that never reached his eyes.

"Good morning, darling," he said, approaching the bed. "Did you sleep well?"

Ballerina made her choice in that moment. Without even realizing it.

"Lololo," she said, her voice surprisingly steady. "I know everything."

The smile on the dancer's face faltered, but only for an instant. "What are you talking about, my dear?"

"The letters. I found them. I know you work for my sister. I know about the photographs."

A heavy silence fell in the room. Ballerina could hear her own heart beating in her ears.

Then, slowly, Lololo's expression changed. The smile vanished, replaced by something colder, more calculating.

"Always the same Ballerina," he said, his voice now devoid of its previous sweetness. "Too curious for your own good."

He moved away from the bed, going to get a robe hanging on the door. He put it on slowly, as if taking time to decide what to say.

"Yes, I work for your sister. I have for years. But believe me, it was never... personal."

"Not personal?" Ballerina felt anger rising inside her. "You lied to me! You seduced me knowing he hadn't betrayed me! How can you say it's not personal?"

Lololo shook his head, an almost pitying expression on his face. "Oh, Ballerina. Always so naive. Do you really think everything revolves around you? The two of you? This is much bigger than a love story between a ballerina and a repentant assassin."

"What are you talking about?"

"About power. About control. About who really pulls the strings in this city." He walked to the window, looking out. "Espressona is just one piece of a much more complex puzzle. And Cappuccino... well, he is a tool too valuable to be wasted on sentimental redemption."

Ballerina felt a chill run down her spine. There was something in Lololo's voice, a conviction, an almost fanatical devotion she had never noticed before.

"Who is behind all this?" she asked, though she feared the answer. "Who do you really work

for?"

Lololo turned, an enigmatic smile on his lips. "Even the walls have ears, my dear. Let's just say there are forces in this city operating on a level you can't even imagine. Forces that have plans for Cappuccino. And for you."

He approached the bed again, leaning down to look her in the eyes. "It's a shame, you know? A part of me really hoped this could work. The two of us, together again. For a moment, I almost believed it could be real."

"It was," Ballerina replied, her voice a whisper. "Once, a long time ago."

"Perhaps." Lololo brushed her face with his hand, a gentle gesture that contrasted with the coldness in his eyes. "But now I have to make a phone call. Espressona will be... interested to know that you've discovered our little secret."

He stood up, heading for the door. "Don't go anywhere. We have much to discuss."

When the door closed behind him, Ballerina leaped to her feet. She didn't have much time. She knew Lololo well enough to know he wouldn't let her leave easily, now that he had revealed himself.

She quickly gathered her few belongings, stuffing them into a small bag. She was about to leave the room when she stopped. She reached for her old, worn ballet costume, hidden at the bottom of a drawer. With trembling fingers, she pulled a small object from a secret pocket that she had carefully preserved: the vial Cappuccino had entrusted to her.

"It's pure poison," he had told her. "One sip and the heart stops in seconds. Keep it for three reasons: as proof of your sister's intentions. Because if I'm captured, I don't want them to find proof on me that I didn't follow the order. And because it might come in handy as a weapon of last resort."

A weapon of last resort. Her fingers tightened around the vial. She had never thought she would use it. But now...

She went to the window. Lololo's apartment was on the third floor, too high to jump without seriously injuring herself. And if she went out the main door, she would surely run into him. She was trapped. And Espressona's men would be arriving soon.

She looked at the vial again. The amber liquid inside seemed to almost glow in the morning light. A chance. A way out. A way not to fall into Espressona's hands again.

But the child... a hand instinctively went to her stomach. She couldn't. She would not sacrifice an innocent life for her own despair.

There was another way out. She knew it.

"Think, Ballerina," she whispered to herself. "What would Cappuccino do in this situation?"

The answer was obvious. Improvise. Adapt. Use what she had available.

With new determination, she went to Lololo's desk. She took a piece of paper and a pen and began to write quickly. A letter. For Cappuccino, if he ever found it. To explain, to ask for forgiveness, to tell him she had never stopped loving him.

When she finished, she carefully folded the paper and placed it so it would be clearly visible on the bed. Then she went to the door, listening. She could hear Lololo's voice, speaking quietly on the phone in another room.

"...yes, she found the letters. No, I don't think she knows about the other plan... How long? ... I understand. I'll keep her here until your men arrive."

There was no time to lose. She returned to the window, examining the building's facade. There was a gutter running alongside the window, and a balcony two floors below. She could make it. She had to make it.

But first...

She opened the vial. The smell that emanated from it was strange, not sharp as one would expect from a poison, but almost sweet.

She dipped her fingertip into the liquid, then drew a line on the letter. One last piece of proof, if anyone found it.

Then, with a sudden decision, she brought the vial to her lips and drained it completely. The taste was surprisingly sweet, like dark honey with a bitter aftertaste. For a moment, nothing happened. Then a warmth spread through her chest, followed by a wave of numbness that radiated from her extremities.

Her knees gave way. She fell onto the bed, her vision blurring, the vial rolling from her limp fingers.

"I'm sorry, Cappuccino," she whispered into the growing darkness. "I found you too late."

Her last thought, before the darkness completely engulfed her, was for the unborn child. A silent prayer for the life she would never know.

A crash echoed through the apartment as the door was kicked down. Cappuccino burst into the room like a fury, his katana drawn, ready to face any threat.

The scene he found paralysed him on the spot.

Lololo lay on the floor in the entryway, unconscious or dead – at that moment, Cappuccino didn't care which. What caught his attention, what froze the blood in his veins, was the motionless figure on the bed. Ballerina.

The katana fell to the floor with a metallic clang as he rushed toward her. His hands, accustomed to dealing death, now trembled as he desperately searched for signs of life. Her skin was already cold to the touch. No perceptible heartbeat. No breath.

"No," he whispered, his voice broken. "No, no, no."

It was then that he saw the empty vial. And the letter. With trembling fingers, he picked it up, immediately recognizing Ballerina's handwriting.

"My beloved Cappuccino," it began. "By the time you read these words, I will be gone."

The letter spoke of betrayal. Of how she had believed the forged photos. Of how she had fled into Lololo's arms seeking comfort or revenge, only to discover that he too had betrayed her, that he had always been in Espressona's service. It spoke of the child she was carrying. Of her terror at the idea that Espressona might use it as another pawn in her perverse game. And finally, it spoke of her love for him. A love that had never faded, not even when she thought she had been betrayed.

"I ask for your forgiveness," it concluded. "For doubting you. For failing to protect myself. For using the poison you entrusted to me. I don't deserve your love, but I hope that one day, in another life, we can find each other again. Yours forever, Ballerina."

Cappuccino let the letter fall, his face streaked with tears. For the first time since he had become an assassin, he wept openly, without shame, without control.

He gently gathered Ballerina's body in his arms, cradling her as one would a sleeping child. Her cream-coloured hair slipped through his fingers, as soft as silk. Her face, despite everything, seemed serene, almost at peace.

"I promised you we would be together," he whispered against her forehead. "I promised I would protect you."

A broken promise. Like all the promises he had made in his life. To Mocaccina. To Espressino. To the unborn child. And now to Ballerina.

Something broke inside Cappuccino in that moment. The last crumb of humanity that Ballerina had awakened in him. The last glimmer of hope for a different life, for redemption.

In its place, a cold, implacable determination took shape. A purpose that burned like ice in his veins.

Espressona would pay. Not with a quick, clean death. No, she would know the same despair, the same pain she had caused. She would see everything she loved destroyed, just as she had done to him. Twice.

Cappuccino gently laid Ballerina on the bed, arranging her as if she were simply sleeping. He leaned down to give her one last kiss on her cold forehead.

Then he picked up his katana, the steel gleaming like ice in the morning light.

He was no longer the man who had tried to leave the life of an assassin. He was no longer the man who had rediscovered his heart.

That man was dead, along with Ballerina. Now he was only Cappuccino Assassino. And he had a mission to complete.

With one last look at the body of the woman he loved, he turned and left the apartment, the blade scraping against its sheath with a sound like a sworn oath.

In the centre of the room, the empty vial gleamed faintly in the morning light. A container of poison that had brought death. Or so it seemed.

From a nearby rooftop, the observer watched the scene unfold with quiet intensity. His waterproof feathers were ruffled by the morning breeze.

"The tragedy plays out according to the script," he murmured to himself. "But the third act is only just beginning."

With a fluid motion, he raised a pair of binoculars, focusing on Lololo's apartment. The dancer still lay on the floor in the entryway, but a faint movement of his chest indicated he might still be alive. Cappuccino was gone, determined on his mission of revenge. And

Ballerina...

Ballerina lay motionless, apparently lifeless. But the observer knew more.

A perfect drama, with love, death, and revenge, the man in the raincoat thought. Or rather, a drama that would have been perfect, if only all the characters had played their assigned parts.

But there was an unforeseen element in the game. Something that not even Espressona, with all her cunning, had considered. The child.

That bud of life growing inside Ballerina, born of a moment of weakness and despair, but destined, perhaps, to change everything.

The observer closed his notebook, reflecting on what he had seen. Too many questions remained unanswered. Too many threads yet to be connected.

Who really were the "forces in the city" that Lololo had spoken of? What was Espressona's true plan for Cappuccino?

One thing was certain: this story was far from its conclusion.

And he would be there, in the shadows, to watch. And to unveil, piece by piece, the truth hidden behind this intricate dance of deceit and passion.

Because sometimes, the truth is like the hidden aroma of a fine coffee – subtle, complex, and revealed only to those who have the patience to wait.

8. THE AWAKENING

The first breath was an explosion in her lungs. Painful, burning, as if she had forgotten how to breathe and her body had to relearn the process from scratch. Ballerina awoke with a violent jolt, a strangled cry dying in her dry throat.

The light blinded her at first – too bright, too real. She blinked several times, trying to bring her surroundings into focus. A room. Lololo's apartment. The bed where she thought she had died.

Dead. She had drunk the poison.

She distinctly remembered the taste, the warmth spreading through her body, the darkness enveloping her. And yet, here she was. Breathing. Her heart was beating – she could feel it hammering against her chest like a frantic drum.

With trembling hands, she touched her face, her neck, her arms, as if to make sure she was truly still in the land of the living. Her skin was cold and damp with sweat, but undeniably alive.

"It wasn't poison," she whispered to herself, her voice hoarse and barely audible.

"It wasn't poison."

She sat up slowly, her head spinning from the effort. How long had she been unconscious? Hours? Days? The light filtering through the windows suggested late afternoon. But of which day?

It was only then that she noticed the absolute silence of the apartment. Lololo was not there. She vaguely remembered seeing him on the floor in the entryway before losing consciousness. Had he fled? Or perhaps...

A shiver of fear ran through her. Cappuccino. Had he been here? Had he found her?

Her gaze fell upon the nightstand, where she had left the letter. It was gone. In its place, a small groove in the wood, as if someone had pressed too hard with a pen. Or with the sharp tip of a katana.

"Cappuccino," she murmured, a lump tightening her throat.

She had to find him. Immediately. Before he did something irreparable.

With immense effort, Ballerina got out of bed. Her legs trembled, threatening to give way with every step, but she forced herself forward. She reached the bathroom, splashed cold water on her face, trying to bring her numb senses back to life.

The mirror reflected an image she barely recognised. Pale as a ghost, with deep, dark circles under her eyes and chapped lips. Her hair, once her glory, was dull and lifeless. But her eyes – they showed a determination that not even near-death could extinguish.

"I have to find him," she said to her reflection. "I have to stop him."

She knew what Cappuccino would do, after reading her letter. After finding her apparently dead. He would go after Espressona. And not for a civil confrontation.

Ignoring the weakness that still permeated every fibre of her body, Ballerina dressed quickly

in the first clothes she could find.

She noticed that the apartment had been turned upside down – drawers open, clothes scattered, furniture moved. Signs of a desperate search, perhaps for clues, perhaps for answers.

There was no trace of Lololo. Only a dried bloodstain on the entryway floor. Not enough to suggest a fatal wound, but enough to indicate he had been injured.

Ballerina felt no compassion. The man who had manipulated her, who had used her as a pawn in a game bigger than herself, did not deserve her tears.

She had almost reached the door when a noise stopped her in her tracks. A faint noise, barely perceptible. Like a rustle of feathers.

She turned slowly.

On the open window, leaning nonchalantly against the sill, was a pigeon. But not just any pigeon.

This pigeon was of a surprising size, as tall as Ballerina herself. He wore a perfectly tailored beige trench coat that fell elegantly over his broad shoulders. A gray, wide-brimmed hat cast a shadow over his feathered face, while a pair of black sunglasses partially hid his piercing gaze. In one wing, he held a small notebook; in the other, what looked like a vintage fountain pen. A camera was slung over his shoulder.

His posture exuded confidence and an air of mystery that seemed straight out of a black-and-white noir film. His blue-violet plumage shone with metallic hues in the light filtering through the window, giving the impression of a creature not only out of the ordinary, but also strangely magnetic. Ballerina stood motionless, unable to decide if what she was seeing was real or a residual hallucination from the potion. The pigeon seemed to sense her confusion, because he tilted his head slightly to the side and spoke, in a surprisingly deep and raspy voice, like someone who has drunk too much whiskey and smoked too many cigarettes.

"I see you've returned to the land of the living, Ballerina Cappuccina."

It was not a hallucination. The side effects of a death-simulating potion did not include talking pigeons in detective trench coats.

"Who... what are you?" she asked, her voice still weak but firmer now.

The pigeon hopped from the windowsill to a nearby chair, from where he could get a better look at her. "My name is Spioniro Golubiro. Private investigator." There was a hint of professional pride in those words.

"A... private investigator?"

"Is that so hard to believe?" The pigeon – Spioniro – seemed almost offended. "In this city, there are assassins with coffee cup heads and ballerinas who drink magic potions. A pigeon detective should be the least strange thing you've seen lately."

Ballerina approached cautiously, studying the strange creature. Spioniro was no ordinary pigeon, not even physically. He was larger, taller than her, with dark gray plumage that verged on midnight blue. His eyes were a brilliant, intelligent, and observant black, missing no detail.

"Why are you here? How do you know who I am?" Ballerina asked, increasingly intrigued.

Spioniro opened his notebook, flipping through pages and pages of notes written in a no-frills but surprisingly elegant script. "I've been following you for a while, Miss Cappuccina. Or should I say madam? I'm not sure what the correct term is for an officially dead ballerina."

"You've been following me?"

"Technically, I'm following the case." Spioniro settled himself more comfortably on the chair, his trench coat rustling like old paper. "It started as a simple matter of infidelity – one of the Arabica Theatre's patrons suspected his wife was cheating on him with a dancer – but it turned into something much more... interesting."

He flipped through the notebook again. "Arabica Theatre. Final performance of the season. The famous Ballerina Cappuccina apparently dies on stage. Then the body swap. The collaboration with Cappuccino Assassino. The escape. The smuggler's betrayal. The ambush in the tunnels. Cappuccino's capture. Your escape from Lololo. The fake death – again. And now, your awakening."

Ballerina listened in disbelief. This strange pigeon detective seemed to know every detail of her recent life.

"How... how can you know all this?"

"It's my job to know things, miss." He closed the notebook with a decisive snap. "I observe. I document. I deduce. And occasionally, when the situation demands it, I intervene."

He stood up; there was something imposing about him. "Like now. Cappuccino Assassino has disappeared. He has gone back to being what he was before he met you – a war machine driven only by revenge. He's about to unleash hell on this city, and I believe you're the only one who can stop him."

Ballerina approached with a faltering step, leaning on the table for support. "Do you know where he is?"

"Not exactly. But I have a good idea of where he's going." Spioniro looked at her intently.

"And I know we don't have much time."

"We have to find him," Ballerina said urgently. "Before he gets to Espressona. Before he does something he can't come back from."

"I agree. But first..." the pigeon approached an open drawer, from which he struggled to pull out a small bag. He dragged it toward Ballerina. "You should eat something. The potion you took suppresses vital functions, but it also consumes a lot of energy. And in your condition, you need all the strength you can get."

"In my condition?" Ballerina looked at him, confused.

Spioniro tilted his head.

"The child. Have you forgotten you're pregnant?"

Ballerina's hand instinctively went to her stomach. No, she hadn't forgotten. But in the confusion of waking up, that thought had been temporarily set aside. Now it returned with force, along with all the doubts and worries.

"How do you—"

"I observed you purchasing the pregnancy test. And I saw your reaction when you read the results." There was an unexpected kindness in the pigeon's rough voice. "Congratulations, I

suppose? Or condolences? I'm never sure what the appropriate response is in these cases." Ballerina opened the bag, finding a sandwich and a bottle of water inside. Spioniro must have procured them somehow. The hunger she hadn't felt until that moment suddenly awakened, fierce. She bit into the sandwich gratefully.

"Thank you," she said between bites. "For the food. And for... I don't know, being here, I suppose."

Spioniro made a gesture with his wing that could have been one of modesty. "As I said, I occasionally intervene. And this situation has passed the point where I can limit myself to observation."

As Ballerina finished eating and regained her strength, Spioniro told her what had happened after she lost consciousness. How Cappuccino had arrived, found her apparently lifeless body, read the letter. How the pain had transformed him, erasing any trace of the man he was trying to become, turning him back into the assassin feared by all.

"Did he confront Lololo?" Ballerina asked, already imagining the answer.

"He wounded him. But didn't kill him. Not because he was merciful, but because he had more important prey." Spioniro looked out the window, toward the city that stretched out below them. "He left a message for Espressona. A promise of death. Not just for her, but for all those close to her."

Ballerina shuddered. She knew Cappuccino well enough to know he wasn't one for empty threats.

"How much time do we have?"

"Hard to say. He left this place about six hours ago. I've lost his trail since then." Spioniro seemed almost embarrassed by this admission of professional failure. "But knowing how he operates, I'd say he's studying the situation. Planning. Observing the movements of Espressona and her lieutenants. He'll probably strike tonight, tomorrow morning at the latest."

He turned back to Ballerina. "There's something else you should know. Bombardiro Crocodilo is in town."

This name made Ballerina freeze mid-sip. "Bombardiro Crocodilo? The being who destroyed Cappuccino's village? Who killed his family?"

"The very same." Spioniro returned to the windowsill, looking down as if expecting to see the infamous crocodile appear at any moment. "He's been back for a few weeks. He's preparing for something big, but I haven't been able to find out what yet."

"Does Cappuccino know?"

"He suspects, I believe. But his mind is focused on Espressona now. Immediate revenge takes precedence over long-term revenge."

Ballerina finished her water and stood up, already feeling stronger. "We have to find him. And we have to find Espressona. And if I can talk to both of them, maybe... maybe I can stop this madness!"

Spioniro studied her carefully. "You could be putting yourself and the child in danger."

"This child won't have a future if his father becomes a wanted murderer throughout the city," Ballerina replied firmly. "And I've already lost too much to give up now."

The pigeon detective seemed to reflect for a moment, then nodded. "Alright. I'll help you. I have some contacts who might help us find Cappuccino before it's too late."
He hopped toward her, extending a wing. "Deal, Miss Cappuccina?"
Ballerina, despite everything, found herself smiling. She gently shook the offered wing.
"Deal, Mr. Golubiro."

The search began immediately. First stop: the old clock tower that Cappuccino had mentioned as an emergency meeting point. It was a long shot – Cappuccino believed her to be dead, so he had no reason to go there – but it was a starting point.
The tower, once a proud symbol of the city, was now an abandoned relic that loomed over the old city. The hands of the enormous clock had stopped years ago, frozen forever at 3:27. Perhaps after a storm that had swept through the city. No one had ever bothered to repair or remove them.
Climbing the crumbling stairs was a challenge for Ballerina, still weak from the lingering effects of the potion. Spioniro flew ahead, scouting the landings, making sure they were alone.

"No recent tracks," he announced when they reached the main clock room. "Undisturbed dust. No sign that anyone has been here for weeks."
Ballerina looked with disappointment at the circular room with the enormous, rusted clock mechanism at its centre. She had hoped, against all logic, that Cappuccino might be here.
"It was a naive plan," she admitted. "He thinks I'm dead. He has no reason to come here."
"Nothing is ever completely useless," Spioniro consoled her, perching on a gear. "Now we know one place he isn't. And eliminating possibilities is part of the investigation."
He looked around with a professional eye. "This place has an excellent view of the city. Cappuccino liked to come here, didn't he?"
Ballerina nodded. "He said it was a good observation point. That he could see without being seen."
"Typical of assassins," Spioniro commented. "Always looking for tactical advantages. But this gives us an idea." He flew to the large circular window, indicating the city below with a wing.
"If you were an assassin determined to get revenge on the queen of the underworld, where would you go to plan your attack?"

Ballerina approached the window, studying the urban landscape. The city stretched out in all directions, a labyrinth of streets, buildings, and squares. From here, she could see Espressona's palace, an elegant neoclassical building in the most exclusive district. And she could also see...

"The Arabica Theatre," she said suddenly. "It's where everything began. Where I faked my death the first time."

Spioniro tilted his head, considering the idea. "A symbolic location. And strategically sound – the theatre has a view of Espressona's palace, and there are numerous underground passages connecting it to other buildings. A good place from which to plan an attack."

"We have to check," Ballerina insisted, already heading for the stairs.

The pigeon followed her with a beat of his wings. "There's another place we'll need to visit: the old coffee warehouse Cappuccino used as a refuge. I know the address – I've followed him there more than once."

Ballerina stopped, looking at him with renewed suspicion. "How much, exactly, do you know about us?"

Spioniro ruffled his feathers, a gesture that in a human would have been a shrug. "It's my job to know things, miss. And I'm very good at my job."

It was not a satisfying answer, but Ballerina decided there were more urgent matters to resolve. "Alright. The Arabica Theatre, then the warehouse."

The theatre was closed, officially for mourning after Ballerina's "death". The lights were off, the doors barred. But for a pigeon detective and a ballerina trained by an assassin, getting in was not a problem.

The interior was shrouded in a ghostly silence. The corridors were empty, the stage deserted, the orchestra seats covered in white sheets like motionless ghosts. The echo of their footsteps seemed amplified by the emptiness.

"No one's here," Ballerina murmured after exploring the dressing rooms and backstage corridors. "And no sign that Cappuccino has been here recently."

Spioniro flew from one theatre box to another, checking the smaller, hidden spaces. "I agree. Let's move on to the warehouse."

The old coffee depot proved to be just as deserted. The dust on the floor showed that no one had set foot there in days. Cappuccino's personal effects – the few he owned – were still in their place, but there was no sign of him.

Ballerina felt overwhelmed by frustration and worry. Time was running out, and every minute that passed was another minute for Cappuccino to complete his plans for revenge.

"Where could he be?" she exclaimed, her voice betraying her desperation.

Spioniro was examining a map of the city hanging on the wall, marked with various points and lines that only Cappuccino could fully interpret.

"We have to think like him," the pigeon said, studying the map with an analytical eye. "The methodical assassin in him would want to observe the target, study their habits, find the perfect moment. But the wounded man, driven by revenge? He might be more... direct."

He turned to Ballerina. "Is there a special place for Espressona? A place she frequents regularly, that has a particular meaning for her?"

Ballerina thought hard. "There's... there's the Studio Macchiato. It's where we both studied dance as children. Before she gave up ballet. She goes there every Thursday night, after it closes. She sits in the main hall and looks at her old reflection in the mirror."

"Today is Thursday," Spioniro noted, his eyes, hidden behind his dark glasses, shining with

investigative excitement. "What time does she usually go?"

"After midnight. When she's sure no one will see her."

The pigeon flew to the clock hanging on the wall. "It's nine o'clock. We have three hours to get to the studio and intercept Cappuccino before he intercepts Espressona."

Ballerina felt invigorated by the concrete possibility of a plan. "Let's go, then."

Spioniro stopped her with a wing. "One moment. We must be prepared. Cappuccino is not in a rational state of mind. He might not recognise you, or me, or anyone who stands between him and his revenge."

He rushed to Ballerina's bag, indicating it. "Do you have something of his? Something personal, that might awaken his memories, his feelings for you?"

Ballerina thought for a moment, then pulled out a small, carefully wrapped handkerchief. She opened it gently, revealing a dried flower petal.

"It was a violet from his village," she explained. "The last one left after the destruction. He kept it as a memento, set inside a locket. He gave it to me the night before he was captured."

Spioniro nodded in approval. "Perfect. It could be the key to bringing him back to his senses."

He turned back to the map. "There's one more thing we need to consider. Bombardiro Crocodilo. He's in town, preparing for something big, and I doubt it's a coincidence that he's returned right now."

"Do you think it's connected to what's happening?" Ballerina asked.

"In my experience, miss, coincidences are as rare as blue pigeons. There is a connection, if you know where to look." Spioniro seemed lost in thought. "I have some leads to follow on that front. Information that could prove crucial."

He turned to her with sudden decisiveness. "Here's what we'll do. You go to the Studio Macchiato. Get there early, hide, and wait. If Cappuccino appears before Espressona, you will try to reach him. To show him that you're alive."

"And you?"

"I will follow another lead. I have an informant who might know what Bombardiro is planning. If it's what I suspect, then all of you – you, Cappuccino, even Espressona – could be in greater danger than you imagine."

Ballerina didn't look convinced. "Should we separate? Wouldn't it be better to stay together?"

"Sometimes, miss, the best strategy is to split up to cover more ground." Spioniro's tone was gentle but firm. "If I find any relevant information, I'll join you at the studio before midnight. And if you run into trouble before then, use this." He handed her a silver whistle.

"It's tuned to a frequency that only I can hear. One blow and I'll be there as fast as I can."

Ballerina took the whistle, studying it with curiosity. "You're full of surprises, Mr. Golubiro."

"It's part of my charm, or so I like to think." There was a trace of humor in his raspy voice.

"Now let's go. We have an assassin to stop, a crime queen to save, and possibly a larger conspiracy to unravel. All in a night's work for a detective and a ballerina."

They headed for the exit, each with their own mission, united by the urgency of the moment. As they crossed the warehouse threshold, Spioniro stopped one last time.

"One more thing, Miss Cappuccina. I know you love this man. I know you believe in him. But be cautious. The assassin you knew and loved may no longer exist. Be prepared to meet a stranger with his face."

With these words of warning, the pigeon detective soared into the evening air, disappearing quickly among the city's rooftops with a swift aerial turn. Ballerina was left alone with her impossible mission, her hand on her stomach in a protective gesture.

"I will find you, Cappuccino," she whispered to the city that stretched out before her. "And I will bring you back. I promise."

She set off with a determined step toward the Studio Macchiato, unaware that at that very moment, on the other side of the city, an old enemy was setting gears in motion that would forever change the destinies of them all.

Because while Ballerina was desperately trying to save the man she loved, Bombardiro Crocodilo was watching the chaos unfold with cruel satisfaction. Everything was going exactly according to his plans.

And the night was still young.

9. THE RETURN OF BOMBARDIRO

The desert wind lifted spirals of sand around the solitary figure. The elephant stood motionless, its bright green cactus body contrasting with the burnt orange of the dunes. Its peculiar light-brown sandals sank slightly into the sand, while its trunk moved slowly in the hot air, as if sniffing for something beyond the horizon.

Lirili Larila, the elephant with the body of a cactus, legendary lord of the desert, was waiting. The spines covering his green torso sparkled under the merciless sun, while his small black eyes scanned the distance.

It was then that he saw it: a cloud of dust on the horizon. A messenger. At last.

The panting camel stopped before him, handing him a letter sealed with red wax. The seal bore the impression of a sharp tooth – unmistakably a crocodile's.

"Has the time come, master?" asked the camel, Frigo Camelo Buffo Fardelo, with a mixture of fear and respect.

Lirili opened the letter with measured movements of his powerful legs. He read the contents, and a slow smile formed on his wrinkled face.

"Yes," he finally replied. "The time has come. Prepare the caravans. We leave at dawn."

As the camel moved away to carry out the orders, the cactus-elephant looked once more to the horizon. Beyond those dunes was the city. And in the city, an old ally awaited him. An ally with sharp teeth and even sharper ambitions.

"Bombardiro," he murmured to the desert wind. "This time, we will not fail."

Thousands of miles away, in the depths of the ocean, another letter was being delivered. The messenger, Trulimero Trulicina, a large fish with four human legs instead of fins and the head of a cat, nervously slipped into the underwater caves that made up the kingdom of Tralalero Tralala.

The anthropomorphic shark was seated on a throne of black coral, his blue shoes with a white stripe placed carefully on a cushion of anemones. His massive gray body seemed even more imposing in the gloom of the cavern, lit only by bioluminescent jellyfish hanging from the ceiling like living chandeliers.

"Approach," Tralalero ordered, his voice surprisingly melodious for a creature with so many sharp teeth.

Trulimero swam to the throne, offering the letter enclosed in a waterproof air bubble.

"From the lord of the surface lands, master."

Tralalero took the letter with a fluid movement of his fin. The blue shoes on his feet seemed absurdly out of place in the deep sea, yet they were his symbol, his distinctive mark. No one dared point out how improbable they were – the last one who had been served as an appetiser.

He read the letter slowly, his black eyes narrowing as he absorbed the information.

"So," he said at last, crumpling the letter in one fin, "old Bombardiro wants to get the gang back together. Interesting."

He rose from the throne, swimming toward a map carved on a mother-of-pearl wall. A map of the city, with surprising detail on the underground tunnels, secret passages, and lines of defence.

"Prepare my personal guard," he ordered the four-legged fish. "We will leave with the next tide."

The fish hesitated. "But, sir, the meeting is not scheduled until—"

"I know very well what the letter says," Tralalero interrupted, a predatory smile showing rows of perfectly aligned teeth. "But I like to arrive early. Especially when there are murky waters to swim in."

He turned to a chest of woven seaweed, from which he pulled a second pair of blue shoes, identical to the first but newer.

"The city," he murmured, stroking the shoes as if they were puppies. "How long has it been? I wonder if they still remember me."

His gaze grew distant, and for a moment he seemed almost melancholy.

"They will remember me very soon," he concluded with a grin that showed all his teeth.

In the beating heart of the city, unaware of the forces moving on the edges of his domain, Bombardiro Crocodilo examined the letters he had just sent. His eyes, yellow with vertical pupils, shone with cruel satisfaction.

"Have the messages been dispatched?" he asked the assistant who waited silently by the door.

"Yes, General," replied the assistant, a nervous-looking mouse with a scar across his snout.

"They should receive them by tomorrow, if they haven't already."

"Excellent." Bombardiro rose from his desk, his imposing figure seeming to fill the entire room. His scaly body, clad in an impeccable military uniform, moved with a grace that contrasted with his bulk. "And the situation with Cappuccino Assassino?"

"As predicted, sir. He has returned to his old self. He is planning the attack on Espressona Signora. Our sources indicate he will strike tonight."

Bombardiro approached the window, looking out at the city that lay beneath him. The city that had once banished him. The city that would soon be his.

"And the ballerina? Is she really dead?"

The assistant hesitated nervously. "Our informants are not certain. There was confusion. Some claim that—"

"I am not interested in uncertainties," Bombardiro interrupted, his voice a threatening hiss.

"I want facts."

"Understood, sir. We will increase surveillance."

"Do it." Bombardiro returned to the desk, where a detailed map of the city was open, marked

with various strategic points. "This is a critical moment. We cannot afford mistakes. The plan has been in motion for too long to be compromised by... unforeseen variables."

He leaned over the map, tracing with a claw the route from Espressona's palace to the Studio Macchiato. "She will be there tonight. And he will come for her. And when the chaos begins..."

A cruel smile revealed rows of razor-sharp teeth.

"...it will be the perfect moment for my triumphant return."

Espressona Signora's office was cloaked in semi-darkness, lit only by the soft glow of a desk lamp. The queen of the underworld was seated in her usual place, but her usual composure seemed cracked. Her fingers drummed nervously on the polished surface of the desk as she studied the reports that had been delivered to her.

"Are you sure about this information?" she asked the silhouette standing before her – her new head of security, after the last one had failed so miserably in guarding Cappuccino.

"One hundred percent, my Signora," replied the scar-faced mastiff. "Cappuccino Assassino has been spotted in three different areas of the city in the last six hours. He's planning something, and it's not hard to imagine what."

Espressona picked up one of the reports, examining it carefully. "And he believes I will be at the Studio Macchiato tonight."

"It's Thursday, my Signora. You go there every Thursday."

"So it's a trap."

"Most likely, yes."

Espressona rose, walking slowly to the window. Her reflection showed a woman still elegant, still powerful, but with shadows in her eyes that were not there before.

"Reinforce security at the palace," she ordered. "And prepare my escort. I am going to the studio tonight regardless."

The bulldog seemed surprised. "My Signora, with all due respect, if Cappuccino is setting an ambush—"

"Then I will be ready," Espressona interrupted, turning to him. "Do you really think I fear that man? I created him. I know exactly what he is capable of."

"But my Signora, his current emotional state makes him unpredictable. He believes his sister is dead, and he blames you."

"My sister was his weak point. Without her, he has gone back to being what he was meant to be: a weapon. My weapon." A shadow crossed Espressona's face. "And weapons can be repurposed, if you know how to handle them."

"And what if you fail?"

Espressona returned to her desk, opening a drawer and taking out a small silver pistol. It was an elegant object, almost a piece of jewellery, but undeniably lethal. As she turned it in

her hands, it reflected the faint light of the lamp.

"I will not fail," she said simply. "And now go. Make sure everything is ready for tonight."

When the mastiff had left, Espressona was alone with her thoughts. She wondered, not for the first time, if she had pushed things too far. If the game of manipulation she had orchestrated had not become too complicated, too dangerous.

But it was too late for second thoughts. The pawns were in motion. And she had no intention of losing the game.

As evening fell, the Studio Macchiato was enveloped in an almost reverential silence. The building, once a glorious training centre for the city's best dancers, was now a shell of its former glory. The stained-glass windows filtered the dying daylight, creating multicoloured patches on the worn wooden floor.

Hidden in the shadows of the old gallery, Ballerina Cappuccina waited. The wait was agonizing. Every minute that passed was another minute Cappuccino had to complete his plans for revenge. Another minute in which he risked irrevocably becoming the assassin he had tried to leave behind.

Ballerina's hand went to her stomach, in a gesture that was becoming more and more habitual.

"We'll find you, father," she whispered. "We'll bring you back."

A sudden movement made her stiffen. Someone had entered the studio. Silent as a shadow, but not silent enough for the sharpened senses of a ballerina trained by an assassin.

Ballerina held her breath, preparing to move. But before she could, she recognised the figure moving in the main hall. It wasn't Cappuccino. And it wasn't Espressona either.

It was Spioniro Golubiro.

The pigeon detective moved with surprising agility for his size, methodically inspecting every corner of the room. His beige trench coat billowed slightly as he moved, his sunglasses now removed in the dim light of the hall, his eyes glinting with his movements. Ballerina emerged from her hiding place, approaching silently. "I thought you were following other leads," she said in a low voice.

Spioniro did not seem surprised by her presence. He turned slowly, as if he had sensed her even before he heard her.

"I found what I was looking for more quickly than I expected," he replied, his deep voice echoing in the empty space. "And what I discovered... well, let's just say it complicates the situation considerably."

He pulled out his ever-present notebook, flipping through it until he found the page he was looking for. "Bombardiro Crocodilo did not return alone. He has contacted old allies.

Powerful allies."

"Who?"

"Lirili Larila, the lord of the desert. An elephant with the body of a cactus, known for his battle prowess as much as for his cunning. He controls the southeast trade routes and has an army of desert creatures at his command." Spioniro turned a page. "And Tralalero Tralala, the shark with the blue shoes. He dominates the coastal waters and sea lanes. Once, he and Bombardiro were the undisputed heads of organised crime in this region."

"And now they're reuniting," Ballerina deduced, a shiver running down her spine.

"Exactly. But not immediately. They are planting the seeds for something bigger. Something that will go beyond tonight." Spioniro closed the notebook. "For now, Bombardiro wants to exploit the chaos that Cappuccino is about to unleash. Use it as a distraction to consolidate his position in the city."

"So there are more threats now," Ballerina murmured. "We have to stop not only Cappuccino, but Bombardiro as well."

"And to do that," Spioniro added, "we may need the help of the person Cappuccino wants to kill."

Ballerina looked at him with a grave expression. "Espressona."

A noise from outside interrupted their conversation. Footsteps. More than one person.

"She's early," Spioniro whispered. "Or perhaps—"

He didn't have time to finish his sentence. The studio door burst open violently, and a dozen armed men stormed in, guns raised.

"Don't move!" shouted the one who seemed to be the leader – the scarred bulldog who had spoken with Espressona a few hours earlier. "Hands where I can see them!"

Ballerina and Spioniro slowly raised their hands. There was no way to escape, not against so many armed men.

"Well," Spioniro muttered with a hint of irony, "it seems our plan has hit a small snag."

On the roof of the Studio Macchiato, completely unaware of the drama unfolding inside, Cappuccino Assassino waited patiently. He had returned to his roots, to the very essence of his training. Motionless as a statue, breathing so slowly that a casual observer might have thought he wasn't breathing at all.

The katana Schiuma di Luna lay beside him, the blade catching and reflecting the light of the crescent moon. He wore his assassin's attire – black on black, with a thin, dark red sash around his waist. His face was a mask of cold determination.

The plan was simple in its elegance. Espressona would arrive, as she did every Thursday.

She would dismiss her escort at the entrance, as she always did. She would enter the studio alone, for her private ritual of self-pity.

And there, in the place where it had all begun – where she and Ballerina had danced as children, where jealousy had planted its first poisonous seeds – Cappuccino would close the circle.

It would not be a quick death. Espressona deserved to suffer. To know despair before the end. To feel, if only for a moment, the pain she had inflicted on Ballerina. On him. Cappuccino closed his eyes, letting the memories of Ballerina flood him. Her smile. Her grace when she danced. The warmth of her skin. The sound of her laugh. Each memory was like a needle in his heart, but he welcomed them all. The pain fuelled him, sharpened his senses, strengthened his resolve.

"Soon," he whispered to the stars. "Soon you will have justice, my beloved."

A movement in the street caught his attention. He heard the screech of brakes. A black limousine stopped in front of the studio. Two bodyguards got out first, quickly checking the area, then opened the back door.

Espressona Signora emerged from the car with the regal grace that had always distinguished her. She wore a fitted black dress, discreet but expensive jewellery, her hair gathered in an elegant updo. She seemed to say something to the guards, who nodded and remained by the car.

Everything was going according to plan. Cappuccino took his katana, preparing to move. He knew the studio like the back of his hand – he had broken in several times over the past weeks, studying every entrance, every exit, every hiding place.

But just as he was about to rise, a strange feeling came over him. A sudden, inexplicable hesitation. Like a memory trying to surface from the depths of his consciousness.

"Don't get distracted," he mentally chided himself. "Not now."

He pushed the thought away, focusing instead on the image of Ballerina. Ballerina, lying motionless in Lololo's bed, the empty vial beside her. Ballerina, who had believed the lies, who had felt so betrayed that she had taken her own life.

Ballerina, who would never dance again, never smile again, never love again.

The rage returned, smothering that momentary doubt.

With a fluid movement, as silent as dew settling on flower petals, Cappuccino slipped from the roof toward the back entrance of the studio.

It was time to complete his mission.

Time for revenge.

In the main hall of the Studio Macchiato, Ballerina and Spioniro had been forced into two chairs, under the close watch of four armed guards. The other men were spread throughout the studio, checking every room, every possible hiding place.

The scarred bulldog, who had introduced himself as Zampastorta, paced back and forth in front of them, clearly unnerved by the situation.

"So," he said, finally stopping in front of Ballerina, "you really are alive. Espressona will be interested in this... revelation."

"Where is my sister?" Ballerina asked, remaining calm despite the situation.

"On her way. But the real question is: where is your assassin lover?"

Ballerina did not answer, holding the bulldog's gaze without blinking.

"It doesn't matter," Zampastorta continued. "We'll find him. And this time, he won't escape."

Spioniro, who had been silent until then, cleared his throat. "Allow me to suggest, Mr.

Zampastorta, that we may have aligned interests at the moment."

The bulldog looked at him suspiciously. "And who exactly are you? I've never seen a pigeon dressed like a B-movie detective."

"Spioniro Golubiro, private investigator." The pigeon did not seem offended by the insult.

"And I believe I have information that might interest your employer. Information concerning a certain oversized lizard with ambitions of conquest."

This caught Zampastorta's attention. "Bombardiro? What do you know about him?"

"Enough to suggest that we might all find ourselves on the same side of the barricade very soon." Spioniro tilted his head toward Ballerina. "And she is likely the only person who can stop Cappuccino Assassino from killing Espressona tonight. Which, in turn, would prevent Bombardiro from using the resulting chaos to his advantage."

Zampastorta seemed to weigh these words. He was about to reply when one of his men ran into the hall.

"Boss! Signora is coming. She's a block away."

"Perfect," Zampastorta replied. "Make sure everything is—"

He was interrupted by a dull thud from an adjacent room. It was followed by the unmistakable sound of a body hitting the floor.

Everyone froze. The guards pointed their weapons toward the door from which the noise had come.

"He's here," Ballerina whispered, her heart pounding. "Cappuccino is here."

The sound of a theatre's main power switch being thrown was heard.

The studio lights suddenly went out, plunging everything into near-total darkness. The only illumination now came from the faint moonlight filtering through the stained-glass windows, creating multicoloured spectres in the gloom.

"Dammit!" Zampastorta cursed. "Emergency lights! Now!"

But before anyone could move, the air was torn by a whistling sound, followed by a choked cry. And then another. And another.

In the near-complete darkness, Cappuccino Assassino was doing what he did best.

Ballerina felt Spioniro move beside her. "Now would be a good time to use your vocal talents, miss," the pigeon whispered.

Ballerina understood immediately. She stood up, took a deep breath, and called out with all the strength she had:

"CAPPUCCINO! IT'S ME! I'M ALIIIVE!"

Her voice echoed through the hall, amplified by the perfect acoustics of the studio designed for dance. For a long, agonizing moment, there was no answer.

Then, somewhere in the darkness, something – or someone – stopped.

"Ballerina?" Cappuccino's voice was incredulous, almost broken.

"Yes, my love," she replied, tears streaming down her face. "It's me. I'm alive. It wasn't poison, it was the potion. The same one I used on stage. It just put me to sleep."

A silence thick with emotion filled the hall. Then, slowly, a figure emerged from the shadows. Cappuccino, his katana still clutched in his hand, his face a mask of shock and disbelief.

"It can't be," he murmured, his voice barely audible. "I saw you... I read your letter."

"It was all true," Ballerina said, cautiously stepping toward him. "Except for the part where I die. The potion... it fooled us both."

She stopped a few paces from him, holding out a trembling hand. "I'm here. Touch me. I'm real."

Cappuccino stared at her as if he were looking at a ghost. The katana slipped from his fingers, falling to the floor with a metallic clang. Hesitantly, almost fearfully, he raised a hand to brush Ballerina's face.

His fingers touched her, warm and alive, and something inside him broke. With a choked sob that seemed to emerge from the depths of his soul, Cappuccino pulled her into a desperate embrace, as if he feared she might vanish at any moment.

"Ballerina," he murmured her name again and again, like a prayer, like a spell. "Ballerina, my Ballerina."

She returned the hug with equal intensity, tears flowing freely. "I'm here," she kept repeating. "I'm here and I'll never leave you again."

The world around them seemed to vanish. They forgot the guards, Zampastorta, Spioniro, even the imminent arrival of Espressona. In that moment, only the two of them existed, reunited against all odds, against fate itself.

It was Spioniro who brought them back to reality. "I'm sorry to interrupt this touching moment," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle, "but we still have a situation to manage."

As if to underscore his words, the lights of the outer lobby suddenly came on. Espressona had arrived.

Zampastorta, who had remained respectfully silent during the reunion, turned to Cappuccino with an urgent tone: "Signora is entering. And I believe it's in all our interests to ensure she survives the night."

Cappuccino pulled slightly away from Ballerina, still holding her by the shoulders, as if afraid she might disappear if he let her go completely. "Why should I help the woman who tried to destroy us?"

It was Spioniro who answered. "Because Bombardiro Crocodilo is back. And he is here, somewhere, tonight. Waiting for the chaos of your revenge to make his move."

Cappuccino visibly tensed at the name. "Bombardiro? Here?"

"Yes," Ballerina confirmed. "And he's not alone. He has contacted old allies. Lirili Larila and Tralalero Tralala."

"The Triumvirate of Terror," Cappuccino murmured, a shadow crossing his face. "I thought they had split up years ago."

"They are reuniting," Spioniro said. "And tonight is just the beginning of their plan."

The main door of the studio creaked open, and everyone turned toward the entrance. Espressona Signora was walking in, alone, unaware of the drama that had just unfolded inside.

She stopped on the threshold, taken aback by the scene before her: her guards standing but motionless, Cappuccino and Ballerina embracing in the centre of the room, Spioniro observing everything with his typical detective air.

And above all, her sister. Alive.

"Ballerina?" Espressona's voice betrayed a rare vulnerability.

"Sister," Ballerina replied, without letting go of Cappuccino.

For a long moment, no one spoke. The air seemed charged with electricity, with unspoken words, with repressed emotions.

It was in that moment that the attack began.

A volley of gunfire shattered the stained-glass windows. Shards of glass flew everywhere as soldiers in dark green uniforms stormed in from every possible opening. At their command was a familiar figure Cappuccino had not seen in years, but who still populated his nightmares.

Bombardiro Crocodilo, in all his terrifying glory.

"What a moving reunion," the crocodile exclaimed, his voice a low growl. "I'm almost sorry to interrupt it. Almost."

With a swift movement, Cappuccino retrieved his katana, pushing Ballerina behind him in a protective gesture. Espressona's guards formed a defensive line, their weapons aimed at the newcomers.

Espressona herself remained impassive, as if Bombardiro's arrival were merely a slight inconvenience.

"I thought you were dead," she said to the crocodile, her tone bored.

"Many did," Bombardiro replied with a grin that showed rows of sharp teeth. "Including your favourite assassin. But as you can see, the rumours of my death were... exaggerated."

He turned to Cappuccino, his yellow eyes shining with cruel amusement. "You've gotten soft, boy. You would have attacked by now. Love has made you... predictable."

Before Cappuccino could respond, Spioniro took a step forward, surprising everyone.

"You know, Bombardiro," the pigeon said in a conversational tone, "I've always thought your problem was talking too much. A classic villain mistake. Always explaining your plans instead of executing them."

Bombardiro looked at Spioniro with clear annoyance. "And who might you be?"

"Just an observer. A chronicler, if you prefer."

"Well, chronicler," the crocodile snarled, "you've arrived just in time to record the end of this story." He turned to his men. "Kill the assassin and the pigeon. Take the sisters. Alive."

Chaos erupted in the studio. Bombardiro's soldiers attacked from every direction, while Espressona's guards returned fire.

Cappuccino moved with the speed and precision of a lightning bolt, the katana Schiuma di

Luna tracing lethal arcs in the air. His every movement was a deadly work of art, every strike a tribute to his training at the Dojo of the Silent Drop.

Ballerina, despite the desperate situation, did not hold back. Her years of dance had given her extraordinary reflexes, superhuman agility. She moved in perfect sync with Cappuccino, as if performing a deadly dance they had rehearsed for years.

Espressona, for her part, proved to be anything but defenseless. The small silver pistol she had brought with her spat death with surprising accuracy, as the queen of the underworld moved with a grace that was a reminder that she, too, had once been a dancer.

Even Spioniro demonstrated unexpected abilities, using his beige trench coat as a makeshift weapon, whipping and disorienting enemies who got too close.

But they were severely outnumbered. For every soldier who fell to Cappuccino's blade or Espressona's shots, two more arrived.

"We have to get out of here!" Spioniro shouted, dodging a burst of bullets that embedded themselves in the wall behind him.

"The back door!" Espressona pointed. "There's a passage that leads to the underground tunnels!"

Cappuccino covered their retreat, his katana dancing in the air like an extension of his body.

"Go!" he yelled. "I'll follow!"

Ballerina, reluctant to leave him. "Come with us! Now!"

For a moment, it seemed Cappuccino wanted to argue. Then his eyes met Ballerina's, and something passed between them – understanding, acceptance, trust.

"We need to buy some time!" Cappuccino said. "Let's try a combination attack."

They had never tried it, but they both knew what to do without saying a word. Like a rehearsed dance with inverted roles, Ballerina suddenly crouched, grabbed Cappuccino's feet, and began to spin on her toes like a top. The speed of her rotation increased, and smoke began to rise from her feet. Meanwhile, the soldiers were getting closer and closer. As he spun, Cappuccino drew his katana, creating a whirlwind of sharp blades. From a distance, they resembled a spinning Tasmanian devil. A lethal combo that killed not only the front line of soldiers, but the shockwave also hit the lines further back.

With a final slash that kept the nearest attackers at bay, the assassin turned and ran toward the retreating group.

They reached the back corridor, Zampastorta and the few surviving guards forming a defensive barrier behind them. Espressona walked confidently to a seemingly anonymous door, entering a combination on a hidden keypad.

The door opened with a pneumatic hiss, revealing a dark passage.

"Inside, quickly!" she ordered, gesturing for the others to go ahead.

As Ballerina and Spioniro entered the passage, Cappuccino stopped beside Espressona.

"Don't think this changes anything between us," he said, his voice low and sharp.

"I wouldn't expect anything less," she replied, holding his gaze without blinking. A furious roar interrupted them. Bombardiro was advancing down the corridor, tossing guards aside as if they were rag dolls. His eyes burned with murderous rage.

"CAPPUCCINO!" the crocodile thundered. "YOU WON'T ESCAPE THIS TIME!"

"We'll talk later," Cappuccino said quickly to Espressona. "Now move!"

They entered the passage, with Zampastorta right behind them. As soon as the last one was inside, Espressona pressed a red button on the wall. The door slammed shut with a metallic click, sealing the entrance. A moment later, they heard the thud of something – probably Bombardiro – crashing against it from the other side.

"Will it hold?" Ballerina asked, looking at the door with apprehension.

"For a while," Espressona replied, lighting a flashlight. "But not forever. We have to move."

The passage was narrow and damp, the rough stone walls seeping water. The flashlight beam cast dancing shadows as they advanced in single file, Espressona in the lead, followed by Ballerina, Cappuccino, Spioniro, and finally Zampastorta.

"Where does this tunnel lead?" Spioniro asked, his voice echoing strangely in the narrow passage.

"To my palace," Espressona replied. "It's one of the many secret passages I had built throughout the city. Old habits of a crime queen."

"Clever," the pigeon commented. "But won't Bombardiro follow us?"

"He doesn't know these tunnels. And even if he managed to get into this one, there are dozens of forks and traps along the way. Without a guide, he'd be lost for days."

They walked in silence for what seemed like miles, the path descending deeper and deeper beneath the city. Only the sound of their footsteps and Zampastorta's laboured breathing broke the oppressive quiet.

At one point, a dull noise in the distance made them all freeze. Like an explosion, muffled by distance and stone.

"They've found us," Zampastorta said, alarm clear in his voice.

"Impossible," Espressona replied. "Unless..." She turned to Cappuccino. "Unless they have a way to track one of us."

Cappuccino was already searching his clothes, looking for anything that could be used as a tracker. It was Spioniro who found the answer.

"The katana," the pigeon said, pointing to the weapon. "Look at the hilt."

Cappuccino raised Schiuma di Luna, examining it under the flashlight beam. A tiny red dot was flashing almost imperceptibly in the decoration of the guard.

"A transmitter," he confirmed, shock evident in his voice. "But when...?"

"During your imprisonment," Spioniro deduced. "Bombardiro must have bribed one of Espressona's men. He knew you would never part with your katana."

Without hesitation, Cappuccino removed the device and crushed it under his heel. But the damage was done.

"We have to move," Espressona said urgently. "Now."

They resumed their march, this time at a much faster pace. The noises behind them grew louder – explosions, shouts, the unmistakable sound of stone being shattered.

"Bombardiro is using explosives to blast a path through the tunnels," Zampastorta explained, breathing heavily. "He's ignoring the forks, creating a direct path toward us."

"How far to the palace?" Cappuccino asked Espressona.

"Too far," was the grim reply. "We won't make it."

"Then we'll fight," the assassin declared, stopping and turning toward the direction the noises were coming from.

"No," Ballerina's voice was firm. "Not like this. Not in a narrow tunnel where they'll have the full numerical advantage."

Espressona seemed to think intently, then pointed to a rusty metal ladder that led to a trapdoor in the tunnel's ceiling. "There. It leads to the surface. To an alley behind the Arabica Theatre."

"The theatre?" Ballerina seemed surprised. "Have we walked that far?"

"The tunnels don't follow the surface streets," Espressona explained. "They were designed to be as direct as possible."

Without wasting any more time, they began to climb the ladder. Zampastorta first, then Ballerina, Cappuccino, Espressona, and finally Spioniro. The trapdoor was heavy and rusted, but Zampastorta managed to open it with considerable effort.

They emerged one by one into the dark alley. The Arabica Theatre rose majestically a short distance away, its lights off, the building deserted after Ballerina's "death".

"The theatre is empty," Espressona said. "We can hide there while we decide our next move."

They quickly headed for the back entrance. Cappuccino picked the lock with the skill that comes from years of practice, and in a few seconds, they were inside.

The theatre was plunged into darkness and silence. Espressona found the emergency switch, turning on the service lights – just enough to see where they were going.

They headed for the stage, the most open and defensible place in the building. The stage where it had all begun. Where Ballerina had faked her first death.

"Full circle," Spioniro commented, looking around with an appraising eye.

"Not for long," Zampastorta retorted, checking his pistol. "I only have a few shots left."

"And I have my katana," Cappuccino said. "But against an army..."

"It's not an army," Espressona corrected him. "Bombardiro has always preferred quality over quantity. He'll have twenty men with him at most. The best, but still only twenty."

"Only twenty," Spioniro repeated with irony. "Against five of us. What I would call excellent odds."

"Four fighters," Ballerina corrected him. "You're a detective, not a warrior."

Spioniro seemed almost offended. "You'd be surprised what an angry pigeon can do, miss. Especially one with my... experience."

They didn't have time to delve into this mysterious aspect of Spioniro's personality. An explosion shook the entire building, followed by the sound of shattering glass and splintering wood.

"They're inside," Zampastorta announced, pointing his pistol toward the entrance to the auditorium.

The five of them arranged themselves in a defensive formation on the stage. Cappuccino in front, katana drawn. Espressona and Zampastorta on the flanks, pistols aimed. Ballerina and Spioniro behind, ready to intervene if necessary.

The doors to the auditorium burst open violently. Bombardiro Crocodilo entered first, followed by a dozen soldiers armed to the teeth. The crocodile looked slightly bruised after the chase in the tunnels, but his eyes still shone with satisfied malice.

"An appropriate setting," he said, his voice echoing in the empty auditorium. "The stage where it all began. Where it will all end."

"You were always theatrical, Bombardiro," Espressona replied in a frosty tone. "Another one of your many weaknesses."

The crocodile laughed, a sound like a hissing pressure cooker. "Weaknesses? I'm the one surrounded by loyal soldiers. I'm the one holding all the cards."

He took a step forward, his imposing figure dominating the auditorium. "But I am also generous. I offer you a choice: surrender now, and your deaths will be quick and painless. Resist, and... well, it will still be fun. For me."

"There is a third option," Spioniro intervened, stepping forward on the stage with surprising authority.

Bombardiro looked at him with annoyance. "And what would that be, birdy?"

"You could simply... leave." Spioniro opened his notebook, flipping through it with a nonchalant air. "You see, I have some very interesting notes here. Notes concerning a certain secret agreement between you and General Struzzobardo."

The crocodile froze, his eyes narrowing into dangerous slits. "What do you know about Struzzobardo?"

"I know he's not dead, as many believe. I know you meet regularly at a certain secret refuge in the Whispering Forest. And I know that your allies – Lirili and Tralalero – would be very interested to discover that you are negotiating with their sworn enemy."

A tense silence fell over the theatre. Cappuccino and the others looked at Spioniro with obvious astonishment. How did he know these things? And more importantly, were they true?

Judging by Bombardiro's expression, they were.

"You're a dead pigeon," the crocodile hissed, his voice laced with venom. "You and all your friends."

He gestured to his men, who advanced with their weapons raised.

It was in that moment that everything changed.

An explosion of shattering glass, as the large windows on the theatre's ceiling imploded.

Dark figures rappelled down on ropes, landing with military precision among Bombardiro's soldiers. Other figures burst in from the side doors, completely surrounding the crocodile's group.

There were at least fifty of them, all dressed in black, all armed, all with the same insignia on their shoulder: a stylised drop of water.

The Dojo of the Silent Drop had come to the rescue.

Leading them was a figure Cappuccino hadn't seen in years but recognised immediately.

"Maestro Matcha," he whispered, in disbelief.

The old monk advanced with a confident step through the ranks of the newcomers. Time had marked his face with new wrinkles, but his eyes were as alive and piercing as Cappuccino remembered them.

"My favourite student," Matcha said, his voice serene despite the chaotic situation. "It has been a long time."

He turned to Bombardiro, who looked both furious and confused in equal measure. "And the legendary Bombardiro Crocodilo. We finally meet. I have heard much about you."

"Who the hell are you, old man?" Bombardiro snarled. "And how dare you interfere in my affairs?"

"I am simply a teacher," Matcha replied with a small smile. "And as for interfering... well, let's just say I have a personal interest in this matter."

He turned to Spioniro, bowing slightly. "As we agreed, my friend."

The pigeon detective returned the bow. "Your punctuality is impeccable, as always, Matcha." Cappuccino looked from one to the other, trying to make sense of what was happening. "You two... you know each other?"

"For a long time," Spioniro confirmed. "Maestro Matcha has been one of my most valuable sources in many cases. And I, occasionally, provide him with information that might interest him."

"Like the location of his lost student," Matcha completed, looking at Cappuccino with what seemed like pride. "And the threat that loomed over him."

Bombardiro, suddenly finding himself severely outnumbered, took a step back. His soldiers closed ranks around him in a defensive formation.

"This isn't the end," he warned, pointing a claw at the group on the stage. "Lirili and Tralalero are coming. And when we reunite, not even your little army of monks will be able to stop us."

"Perhaps," Matcha conceded calmly. "But they are not here today, are they? It's just you. And your men seem... uneasy."

It was true. Bombardiro's soldiers were casting nervous glances at the Dojo warriors, clearly unenthusiastic about the prospect of facing them.

Bombardiro noticed this and, with a growl of frustration, gestured to his men. "Retreat. For now."

He turned to leave, but stopped one last time, looking Cappuccino directly in the eyes.

"Remember my words, boy. We will meet again. And when we do, no old monk will be able to save you."

With these parting words, Bombardiro and his men withdrew, disappearing into the shadows of the theatre.

A tense silence lingered for a few moments after their departure. Then, slowly, the Dojo warriors lowered their weapons, relaxing their combat stances.

"He's gone," one of them confirmed, returning from a quick reconnaissance. "They've left the theatre."

Cappuccino came down from the stage, approaching his old master with a mixture of reverence and confusion. "Master, how...?"

"How did I know you were in danger?" Matcha completed. He turned to Spioniro, who was calmly tucking his notebook into his raincoat pocket. "Our feathered friend here has many talents. Observation is just one of them."

Ballerina approached Cappuccino, taking his hand. Espressona and Zampastorta remained on the stage, both visibly tense but intrigued by the events.

"So," Cappuccino said, looking at Spioniro with new awareness, "all this time... you were watching us not just out of curiosity, but because you were in contact with the Dojo?"

"Let's just say I had more than one client interested in this story," the pigeon detective admitted. "But my primary loyalty has always been to the truth. And the truth is that you, Cappuccino Assassino, were never meant to be just an instrument of death. Matcha knew it. I discovered it by observing you. And she," he gestured to Ballerina, "proved it by loving you."

Matcha placed a hand on Cappuccino's shoulder. "My most promising student. I knew you would find your way, in the end. Even if it required... unexpected detours."

He looked toward Ballerina, a gentle smile on his elderly face. "And you must be the ballerina who reawakened his heart. I am grateful to you."

Ballerina blushed slightly, bowing gracefully. "The honour is mine, Master."

"And now," Matcha said, growing serious again, "we must speak of what is to come."

Bombardiro was not lying: Lirili and Tralalero are indeed coming. The Triumvirate of Terror is about to reunite. And when it does, this city – and perhaps the entire world – will face a threat unlike any it has ever known."

He looked at each of them, one by one. "You all have a role to play in what is to come. The question is: are you ready to accept it?"

Cappuccino squeezed Ballerina's hand, feeling a new determination grow inside him. No longer driven by revenge or pain, but by something deeper. Brighter.

"We are ready," he answered for both of them.

Espressona came down from the stage, approaching the group. "I am too," she declared, her gaze meeting her sister's. "It is time to leave old grudges behind. We have a common enemy now."

Spioniro closed his notebook with a definitive gesture. "Good," he said, a rare smile creasing his beak. "Because the story is about to get much more interesting."

Outside the theatre, the first light of dawn was beginning to colour the sky. A new day was being born, bringing with it the promise of unimagined challenges, but also of possibilities never before considered.

The stage was set. The actors were in position. And the curtain was about to rise on the final act of this extraordinary story. An act that would require courage, strategy, and, above all, unity.

Because as Bombardiro retreated to reunite with his allies, as the desert wind brought Lirili ever closer to the city, as the ocean waves pushed Tralalero toward the coast, one thing was certain: the fate of all of them was now intertwined in a design larger than anyone could imagine.

And at the centre of it all, an assassin and a ballerina, united by a love that had defied death itself.

The final dance was about to begin.

As the group discussed future strategies, Spioniro Golubiro discreetly moved away, leaping silently onto one of the theatre's ceiling beams. From that privileged position, he could observe the entire scene below with a clinical eye. He pulled out his inseparable notebook, meticulously noting every detail of what had just happened. The truth had many facets, and he always preferred to contemplate them from different angles. "The game grows more complicated," he murmured to himself as he wrote, "but the real match has yet to begin." He closed the notebook with a satisfied gesture, placed it in the inner pocket of his raincoat, and returned to observing the group.

Like good coffee, truth also needs time to fully emerge. And he would continue to observe, document, and, finally, reveal.

10. THE DANCE OF THE SISTERS

The dawn that followed the battle with Bombardiro Crocodilo was unlike any other. The sky seemed clearer, the air fresher, as if nature itself were celebrating their survival.

In the old Arabica Theatre, where it had all begun, the protagonists of this story were licking their wounds – some visible, others hidden deep in the soul. The crumbling structure, abandoned after Ballerina's "death", had become their makeshift refuge.

Cappuccino, sitting on an old costume trunk, was bandaging a wound on his arm with methodical precision. His movements were measured and economical, like everything he did. But his eyes betrayed a new kind of turmoil. He kept looking at Ballerina, as if to make sure she was still there, still alive.

Ballerina moved through the shadows of the stage, touching familiar objects – a ribbon here, a pointe shoe there. Relics of a life that seemed to belong to someone else. Every so often she would stop, a hand instinctively going to her stomach, a gesture so fleeting that only Cappuccino's trained eye could catch it.

Espressona Signora, for the first time since they had known her, seemed to have lost some of her imposing presence. Sitting in the front row of the empty auditorium, she stared at the stage with an indecipherable expression. Her black dress, usually impeccable, was torn in several places. A trickle of dried blood marked her face like a scarlet tear.

It was Spioniro, perched on a high ledge, who broke the silence.

"We need to discuss what happened," he said, his voice echoing in the empty space. "And what we must do now."

"Bombardiro is wounded but not dead," Cappuccino replied, finishing the bandage. "He will retreat to lick his wounds. It will buy us time, but not much."

"His allies are still out there," Espressona added. "Tralalero Tralala. Lirili Larila. We don't know how close they are or what their plans are."

"And us?" Ballerina asked, turning to the group. "What is our plan? Do we keep fighting? Do we run? Do we hide?"

The silence that followed was thick with unspoken possibilities, with paths not yet chosen. Espressona rose slowly and walked onto the stage. She stopped a few paces from Ballerina, studying her with eyes that, for the first time, showed uncertainty.

"Before we decide anything," she said, "there are truths that must be revealed."

It was Ballerina who spoke first. "Why, sister?" she asked suddenly, her voice echoing in the darkness. "Why all this? Why push me to the point of wanting to die?"

Espressona continued to walk, her back rigid. For a moment it seemed she would not answer.

"I didn't want you to die," she said at last, her voice strangely vulnerable. "That was never the plan."

"You sent your assassin after me," Ballerina insisted.

"I sent someone I thought could protect you."

Espressona stopped, turning to look at her sister. The light filtering through the dusty windows cast strange shadows on her face, giving the impression that she wore a constantly shifting mask.

"I knew Bombardiro was back. I knew he was looking for ways to hurt me. And you were my most obvious weakness."

"Are you telling me you staged all of this to protect me?" Ballerina's voice was incredulous.

"In a way. I wanted the world to believe you were dead. For Bombardiro to believe you were dead. So you would no longer be a target."

Espressona resumed her pacing, circling Ballerina like a predator, but in her eyes, there was no threat – only a strange, reluctant vulnerability.

"The vial I gave to Cappuccino did not contain poison. It was the same potion you used on stage – a death-simulating potion."

Cappuccino and Ballerina exchanged an astonished look.

"Are you saying that..." Cappuccino began.

"That you both replaced a death-simulating potion with... a death-simulating potion!"

Espressona's tone was almost amused. "An irony I had not anticipated."

"I don't believe you," Ballerina said, her voice cold. "You manipulated us. You made Cappuccino believe I had betrayed him. You almost destroyed our lives."

"Yes," Espressona admitted, without trying to deny it. "I used... questionable methods. But my ultimate goal was to protect you. In my own way."

"A twisted way," Spioniro commented from behind.

"The world I live in is twisted, pigeon," Espressona retorted sharply. "You don't survive as a crime queen for twenty years by acting with transparency and honesty."

"And the envy?" Ballerina asked. "The jealousy over my natural talent? Was that all a lie, too?"

Espressona was silent for so long it seemed she wouldn't answer. Then, in a voice barely audible: "No. That was real. It has always been real." A sigh. "But the love for my sister is also real. It is still real. And sometimes, the things we do for love are the hardest to understand." Ballerina moved closer to Espressona, studying the face that so resembled her own and yet was so different – harder, more marked, but in that moment also more vulnerable.

"You've envied me my whole life," Ballerina said, "and I have envied you."

Espressona looked at her, surprised. "You? What did you have to envy in me?"

"Your courage. Your determination. Your ability to make your way in a world that had given you nothing." Ballerina smiled sadly. "I could dance better than you, it's true. But you knew how to face life. How to survive. That's a talent as rare as mine, perhaps rarer."

The two sisters looked at each other, truly looked, perhaps for the first time since they were children.

"I thought I hated you," Espressona admitted. "I wanted to hate you. But when Cappuccino kidnapped you instead of killing you, when I knew you were alive... I felt relief. And it was that relief that terrified me more than anything else."

"Why?"

"Because it meant I had a weakness. And in my world, weaknesses get exploited."

Cappuccino, who had been watching in silence, drew near. "Is it true, Espressona? The original vial didn't contain poison?"

"It's true," she confirmed. "I would never have killed my sister. Make the world believe she was dead – yes, that. Make her suffer a little – that too. But not kill her."

Cappuccino's lips curved into what almost looked like a smile. "So I risked my life, my career, everything... for nothing?"

"No," Ballerina said, taking his hand. "Not for nothing. If you hadn't done it, we would never have found each other. We would never have been together."

"You found something more precious than revenge," Espressona observed. "Something I've never had."

"It's not too late," Ballerina said softly. "Not even for you."

As the afternoon shadows lengthened, the two sisters continued to talk. Words that had remained unspoken for years finally emerged. Shared memories – the smell of the stage before a performance, the endlessly repeated dance exercises, their mother encouraging them both in her own way.

"Remember that time you fell during the rehearsal for the Dance of the Fairies?" Ballerina asked.

"And you convinced everyone it was new choreography?" Espressona smiled at the memory.

"You repeated it identically, fall included, so it would look intentional."

"I was your little sister. I protected you how I could."

"And I protected you, in my own way."

Cappuccino watched them, fascinated by the exchange. He had never seen Espressona so... human. The impassive mask of the crime queen had fallen away, revealing simply a woman with her wounds, her regrets, her hopes.

"What happens now?" he asked at last. "Bombardiro knows we are all alive. Lirili and Tralalero are coming. The war is only just beginning."

"Perhaps," Ballerina said, "but this war has already changed something." She looked around the empty theatre, a silent witness to so many stories. "It has brought a family back together."

"Family," Espressona repeated, as if tasting a word in a foreign language. "A strange word for a woman who destroyed one and created another made of criminals and hitmen."

"Families come in many forms," Spioniro observed, dropping gracefully from his observation point. "Some bound by blood, others by choice, still others by circumstance."

Cappuccino moved closer to Ballerina, taking her hand. There was an intensity in his gaze that made her hold her breath.

"Whatever happens next," he said, "let's face it together. As a family."

Ballerina squeezed his hand with surprising strength. Then, with visible determination, she

turned to her sister.

"Espressona," she said, "I forgive you. For everything."

Those simple words seemed to strike Espressona more deeply than any physical attack. For a moment, her tough facade cracked completely. Her eyes filled with tears that she stoically refused to let fall.

"I don't know if I deserve forgiveness," she finally replied. "But I accept it. And I promise this: from this day forward, my strength is your strength. My resources are your resources. My empire..." she paused, searching for the right words, "...can be used to protect, not just to control."

"Three little cups against the world," Ballerina murmured, with a small smile.

"Four," Cappuccino corrected, squeezing her hand.

"Five," added Spioniro, his beak curving into what looked like an avian version of a smile.

Espressona studied the motley group – an assassin, a ballerina, a pigeon detective, and herself, the queen of the underworld. A strange family, no doubt. But perhaps for that very reason, a family that could survive in a strange world.

"Five," she confirmed. And then, with an expression of genuine curiosity, she asked, "And perhaps, soon, six?"

The silence that followed Espressona's question was thick, heavy with unspoken meaning. The crime queen's eyes rested deliberately on Ballerina's stomach.

Ballerina paled. "How did you..."

"I'm an observer by profession," Espressona answered softly. "The way you touch your abdomen when you think no one is watching. Your refusal of coffee this morning – you, who have always loved coffee more than anyone." A smile, almost shy. "And besides, you are my sister. I know you."

Cappuccino looked from one to the other, confused. Then, slowly, understanding dawned in his eyes.

"Ballerina?" he asked, his voice barely audible. "Is it true?"

She nodded, unable to speak for a moment.

"I'm pregnant," she said at last. "I found out before... before I drank the potion. It's one of the reasons I was so desperate. I thought I had lost you, and that I would have to raise our child alone."

"Our...?" Cappuccino seemed overwhelmed, unable to process the words.

"Yes, yours," Ballerina confirmed, with a trembling smile. "Not Lololo's, as you might have believed. I never... not with him."

Cappuccino stood motionless, his face an indecipherable mask. Then, with a movement so quick that no one saw it coming, he embraced Ballerina, lifting her off the ground in a gesture of pure joy.

"A child," he whispered against her neck. "A child!"

His face, when he pulled away from her, was transformed. The hard eyes of the assassin now shone with something that no one, not even Espressona, had ever seen before – a pure, absolute happiness.

"It won't be like with Espressino," he promised, his voice broken with emotion. "We will not lose this child. I swear it on my life."

Espressona watched the scene with a complex expression – joy, envy, nostalgia, determination, all mixed in her gaze.

"A nephew," she said at last. "Or a niece. A new member of the family."

She approached hesitantly, as if unsure of her right to participate in this moment. Ballerina, without hesitation, took her sister's hand and placed it on her own stomach.

"Your niece or nephew," she confirmed. "And they will need a strong aunt to teach them how to survive in this crazy world."

"And a mother to teach them how to dance through difficulties," Espressona added.

"And a father who will protect them at the cost of his own life," Cappuccino concluded.

In that moment, despite the imminent danger, despite the threats looming on the horizon, there was an almost tangible stillness in the old theatre. As if time itself had stopped to allow this fragment of happiness to exist, pure and untainted.

Ballerina took Espressona's hands in hers.

"When all this is over, I want you to be a part of your nephew's life. I want you to be there."

Espressona looked at their clasped hands, then at her sister's face. A rare emotion crossed her face – hope, mixed with a vulnerability she had never allowed anyone to see.

"Thank you," she whispered, so softly that only Ballerina could hear.

Spioniro, who had watched the exchange with the keen eyes of one who has spent a lifetime studying the complexities of the soul, silently closed his notebook. Some truths were too private to be noted down, even for a detective as meticulous as him.

"So it's decided," Cappuccino said, looking at the motley group. "We will fight. Together. But first, we must find a safe place. A place where Ballerina and the child can be safe while we prepare."

"I have a villa on the coast," Espressona offered. "In Crema Sul Mare. It's isolated, well-defended, and no one connects it to me. Not even my most trusted lieutenants know of its existence."

"Crema Sul Mare," Ballerina repeated, savouring the name. "It sounds... peaceful."

"It is," Espressona confirmed. "That's why I chose it. Everyone needs a place where they can simply be themselves, away from the masks we wear in the world."

For the first time, Cappuccino seemed to see Espressona not as the queen of the underworld, not as a manipulator, but as a complex woman with her contradictions, her mistakes, and perhaps, a chance for redemption.

"We leave at dawn," he decided. "Before Bombardiro can regroup."

As the group prepared for the night, Spioniro slipped away silently, climbing to the theatre roof to observe the city below. The lights shone like fallen stars, unaware of the drama unfolding in the old building.

He took out his notebook one more time, flipping through pages dense with notes, sketches, questions. This story, so full of twists and revelations, was finally taking its complete shape.

But as he wrote his final observations for the day, he couldn't help but wonder what his role was in all this. Was he really just an observer? Or was he too, like everyone else, part of a larger design, the full shape of which he could not yet see?

Then, as if speaking to himself – or perhaps to the invisible reader of his chronicle – he said: "And so concludes this chapter of their story. The ballerina and the assassin, united by fate, separated by deception, reunited by love. But every end is a new beginning, and the shadows of the past have a strange habit of re-emerging when you least expect them... I could write a book about this!"

With these enigmatic words, Spioniro Golubiro, the pigeon detective with the infinite notebook, looked directly through the pages of this story. At you, the readers. Because I – your humble narrator – have always been here, between the lines, observing everything from high up, in my worn-out raincoat.

But this is not the end of the story. Not completely...

The journey to Crema Sul Mare was quiet, each passenger lost in their own thoughts. Espressona's private carriage – an elegant but discreet vehicle – glided along the coastal roads like a ghost.

Ballerina slept, her head resting on Cappuccino's shoulder, her face finally relaxed after days of tension. He watched her with an expression no one had ever seen on him before – tender, protective, almost vulnerable.

Espressona sat across from them, her gaze fixed on the landscape flowing past the window. Her hands, usually so steady, betrayed a subtle nervousness, drumming rhythmically on the armrest.

"How did you become..." Cappuccino began, then paused, searching for the right words.

"The queen of the underworld?" Espressona completed, with a half-smile. "It's a long story."

"We have time," he replied, his voice still cool but with a note of genuine curiosity.

Espressona studied him for a moment, then gave an imperceptible nod.

"After I discovered the truth about my family – about my uncle – I was devastated," she began. "I was fifteen. The age where your whole identity is in turmoil, and then to discover that there is darkness in your blood..." She shook her head. "I rebelled. In every possible way. And one of those ways was to seek out my uncle, Don Cappuccio Corretto."

"The mafia boss?" Cappuccino asked, surprised.

"Our mother's brother," Espressona confirmed. "The black sheep of the family. The one who was never spoken of, except in whispers. Naturally, for an angry teenager, he was the most fascinating figure in the world."

She looked at her hands, as if seeing traces of that distant past on them.

"He took me under his wing. At first, I thought it was out of family affection. Later I

understood it was because he saw something useful in me – intelligence, determination, and above all, ruthlessness." A bitter smile creased her lips. "He was right, of course. I learned quickly. In three years, I was managing half of his operations. In five, I had created my own parallel organization. In ten, when he was assassinated, I inherited his entire empire and expanded it beyond his wildest dreams."

"And Ballerina? Did she know?"

"No," Espressona replied, glancing at her sleeping sister. "Our parents did everything to keep her away from that influence. From me. They thought I was beyond saving, but that she could still be saved." A pause. "They were right about that, too."

"Did you ever truly wish her harm?" Cappuccino asked.

Espressona was silent for a long time, as if searching for the deepest truth within herself.

"I envied her," she admitted at last. "Deeply. For her talent. For her purity. For the unconditional love she received from our parents. But hate her?" She shook her head. "No. Not really. I wanted to punish her. I wanted her to know suffering. But kill her? Never."

"And now?"

"Now?" Espressona looked out the window, where the landscape was changing – greener, more open, with the sea visible on the horizon. "Now I just want to protect her. Her and the child. Maybe it's my big-sister instinct finally waking up. Or maybe it's just age making me sentimental." She smiled, a strange expression on her usually stern face. "Or maybe I'm trying to make up for all my mistakes before it's too late."

Cappuccino looked at her with an unreadable expression, then nodded slowly, as if he had made a decision.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I believe you can change, that you can be more than the sum of your mistakes."

They were the kindest words he had ever spoken to her, and for a moment it seemed Espressona was about to be moved. But the moment passed quickly, and her usual composure returned.

"Thank you," she said simply. Then she pointed out the window. "We're almost there."

The carriage had begun to climb a narrow road that wound up a cliff. As they ascended, the view opened up, revealing the vast expanse of the sea below – bright and blue under the midday sun.

Ballerina woke up just as they reached the top, blinking sleepily.

"Are we there?" she asked, her voice still thick with sleep.

"Almost," Espressona answered softly. "Look."

Ballerina followed her gaze and held her breath. The villa stood on the clifftop, an elegant white stone structure that seemed to blend with the sky. A terraced garden sloped down toward the sea, a riot of colourful flowers and aromatic plants.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

"It was once an old lighthouse," Espressona explained. "I renovated it myself. It's my refuge when the weight of the empire becomes too much."

As the carriage drove the final stretch of road, Cappuccino carefully studied the

surroundings with a professional eye.

"Defensible," he commented. "Limited access, good visibility, elevated position. You chose well."

"I didn't choose it for strategic reasons," Espressona replied. "I chose it for this."

The carriage stopped, and when they got out, the sea breeze hit them, fresh and salty. The sound of the waves crashing on the rocks below was the only sound, apart from the occasional cry of a seagull.

"Peace," Ballerina said, understanding immediately.

"Peace," Espressona confirmed. "Something we have all sought in different ways. And perhaps, for a while, we can find it here."

"A nice place to hide," he commented.

"But even the most beautiful hiding places have their secrets," Cappuccino whispered.

"Not this one," Espressona replied, having heard him. "There are no secrets here. Only truths waiting to be accepted."

They entered the villa, where the air smelled of lavender and rosemary. Light streamed in through large windows, creating plays of shadow on the terracotta floors. It was a place that exuded warmth and welcome – the exact opposite of what one would expect from the home of the queen of the underworld.

"I'll show you to your rooms," Espressona said. "Then you can rest. Tomorrow we'll start planning."

As she led them through bright corridors and rooms furnished with simple yet sophisticated taste, Cappuccino couldn't help but notice how different Espressona seemed here. More relaxed. More authentic. As if this villa represented the woman she could have been, in a different life.

The room for Cappuccino and Ballerina overlooked the sea. A large bed with fresh linens occupied the centre, and a balcony opened onto the endless view of the water.

"Rest," Espressona said. "The journey was long. There are clean clothes in the closet, food in the kitchen. Make yourselves at home."

She was about to leave when Ballerina called her.

"Espressona."

She turned.

"Thank you," Ballerina said. "For this place. For the truth. For everything."

Espressona stood motionless for an instant, then nodded briefly and left, gently closing the door behind her.

Left alone, Cappuccino and Ballerina gave in to a moment of quiet, the first real quiet since this whole story began. They held each other tightly, one's breath mingling with the other's, the beats of their hearts finding a common rhythm.

"Do you think we'll be okay here?" Ballerina asked.

"For a while," Cappuccino answered, honest as always. "Long enough to rest. To prepare. To decide our next step."

"And after?"

Cappuccino pulled back slightly to look her in the eyes.

"After, we will find a place of our own. A place to raise our child in peace. A place where no one will know us as the assassin and the ballerina, but only as a normal family."

"Do you really think that's possible?" Ballerina's voice was full of hope but also doubt.

"We will make it possible," Cappuccino promised. And for the first time since she had known him, Ballerina saw in his eyes not the cold determination of the assassin, but the warm certainty of a man who had finally found a purpose greater than revenge.

Outside the window, the sun began its slow descent toward the horizon, painting the sky in gold and orange. A perfect sunset at the end of terrible days. A symbol, perhaps, of what might lie on the horizon – beauty after pain, peace after the storm.

But in Crema Sul Mare, as everywhere, the night always follows the sunset. And in the coming darkness, watchful eyes were observing. Eyes that belonged to creatures who were not yet ready to reveal their presence.

On the beach below the villa, the water rippled in a way that was not caused by the wind or natural tides. A dark shape moved just below the surface, then disappeared again into the depths.

Tralalero Tralala, the shark with the sneakers, had found his prey.

And miles away, in the desert that separated the villa from the city, a cloud of dust signalled the advance of something large. Something moving with relentless determination toward the coast.

Lirili Larila, the elephant in the sandal, was coming.

The peace of Crema Sul Mare would be short-lived. But for now, inside the white villa on the cliff, four tormented souls found a moment of respite. A breath before the approaching storm.

And I, who had followed the carriage in flight, perched on a nearby wall, my raincoat fluttering. I observed everything, noted everything, preparing to document what I felt would be the final act of this extraordinary story.

A story that, like good coffee, had taken time to reveal its full aroma. A story that was now, finally, approaching its conclusion.

But as every good narrator knows, conclusions are often just new beginnings in disguise. And in this story of passion, betrayal, and redemption, the end was only the beginning of something new.

Something that, perhaps, would one day be told to a child with his mother's eyes and his father's determination. A child born of the most unlikely of loves, in a world where even the coldest hearts can beat again.

A child who would bear the name of Cappuccino Ballerino, in honour of his parents and the extraordinary story that led to his existence.

The story of Cappuccino Assassino and Ballerina Cappuccina was not yet over.

In fact, perhaps it had just begun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lorenzo Memetico is a 35-year-old creative from Northern Italy, whose curiosity leads him to explore seemingly distant worlds: from social media to chemistry, from quantum physics to digital marketing, from personal and spiritual growth to a passion for craft beer and stories that ignite the imagination of children.

When he first encountered the surreal universe of "Italian brainrot" on social media, he saw something deeper than what others saw as simple viral memes: characters with extraordinary narrative potential, modern archetypes hidden behind apparent digital nonsense. The complexity of figures like Cappuccino Assassino and Ballerina Cappuccina, trapped in relationships as absurd as they were touching, made him realise that these stories deserved much more than a few seconds on TikTok.

"I couldn't help but think that all of this deserved a movie, or even better, a book," the author recalls. And so, he began a meticulous process of collecting, elaborating, and weaving, transforming viral fragments into a cohesive narrative that maintains the surreal originality of the memes while acquiring the emotional depth of a classic novel.

Cappuccino Assassino: The Last Dance represents his literary debut, the first volume of what promises to be a saga capable of forever transforming the way we look at phenomena of contemporary digital culture.

11. POST CREDIT: A NEW GAME

The city glittered in the night like a sea of fallen stars, seen from the top of the Diamond Tower's twenty-fourth floor. Lights pulsed to the frantic rhythm of oblivious lives, unaware of the eyes watching them from above.

The office was silent. No sound except for the discreet hum of the air conditioning and the occasional clink of ice in a crystal glass.

The figure at the window remained motionless, his back turned. A perfectly tailored suit, broad shoulders, a posture that exuded natural authority. A black-gloved hand rose slowly, bringing a cigar to his mouth. A thin wisp of aromatic smoke rose towards the ceiling, dancing in the subdued light.

The door opened with a discreet click.

"You called for me, Boss?" The voice was hoarse, somehow damp, as if the speaker had just emerged from water.

The figure at the window didn't turn. "Come in, Trippi."

The man – if one could call him a man, as he had the head of a fish and the body of a gorilla – stepped forward with a heavy tread.

"Have you been to Crema Sul Mare?" asked the figure at the window, his voice soft yet authoritative.

"Yes, Boss." Trippi approached the massive mahogany desk that dominated the office. "The assassin and the ballerina are still there. They're living in the villa on the cliff. She's in an advanced state of pregnancy."

A brief silence. Then: "And the sister?"

"She comes and goes. She's left the control of her criminal empire to her lieutenants. It seems she's trying to... change her life."

The last comment was uttered with evident disdain.

The figure suddenly moved, turning from the window.

"Change her life," he repeated, as if tasting a fine wine. "Fascinating how the most ruthless beings believe it's possible to rewrite their past."

Another click of the door. A new figure entered, this one very different. Tall, slender, with a military bearing.

"We're ready, Boss!" he announced in a ringing voice.

The figure at the desk turned completely, but his face remained in shadow.

"Excellent work, Bombo."

Bombombini Gusini, ex-war hero, noble goose, protector of the skies, brother of the infamous Bombardiro Crocodilo, smiled – as much as a beak can smile.

"The moment is almost upon us," said the figure, setting down his submachine gun. "But first, I want the child to be born."

"The child?" Trippi seemed confused. "What does the brat have to do with any of this?"

The figure let out a low laugh, almost a growl. "Oh, that child is far more important than you could possibly imagine, my dear Trippi."

He turned again, this time allowing a shaft of light to partially illuminate his face – or rather, part of his snout. Sharp teeth gleamed in a disturbing smile. "It's a long-term strategy, I admit. But if there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's patience."

With a fluid gesture, he pulled an old, yellowed photo from the drawer.

In the photo, four young creatures smiled at the camera: a crocodile, a goose, a beaver, and a man with the head of a fish.

"Once, we were friends," he said softly. "Before the war swept everything away. Before ambition corrupted our hearts."

"Now it's my turn," concluded the figure, putting the photo back in the drawer. "And unlike them, I will not make the same mistakes."

He turned back towards the window, contemplating his reflection in the glass. For an instant, the light fully revealed his face – a beaver's snout with sharp incisors and eyes black like bottomless pits.

"Starting today, a new era begins," he declared. "An era where no one will be safe. Not even in Crema Sul Mare. You have the word of Bobrito Bandito!"

Immediately, thunder rumbled in the sky, as if to frame this threat.

The city lights below them seemed to tremble, like dying stars in the vastness of the night.

"Go to Cannelloni Dragoni," ordered Bobrito, his voice suddenly hard as steel. "It's time for the dragon to wake up."